**How Much Human Resource Management Education is Enough?
Examining Business Program Core Curricula**

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**Abstract**

The financial costs of harassment, discrimination, and retaliation to employers and the impact these actions have on employees are well-documented in the literature and litigation records. Despite these costs and the personal impact incurred by these actions, the number of discrimination charges remains remarkably high. While businesses in the U.S. have instituted training related to sexual harassment and diversity, equity, and inclusion, most business schools have not made curricular changes to help combat the problem. Based on the author’s research, fewer than 8% of public university business schools in the U.S. require any type of Human Resource Management courses in the required business core curriculum. This suggests that many students are not exposed sufficiently to information concerning employment law, recruitment and hiring, disparate treatment, adverse impact, retaliation, and other important human resource management topics that all organizational leaders and employees need to know.

 *Keywords*: human resource management (HRM), human resource management education, human resource management curriculum, business education

**Introduction**

The science and practice of human resource management (HRM) developed alongside the rapid advancement of business management science during the industrialization of the United States in the early 20th century (Kadam et al., 2022; Kaufman, 2001; Rotich, 2015). This new business practice was initially called the ‘Personnel Department,’ and most of the functions at that time consisted of paperwork processing, payroll, benefits management, and organizing the company picnic. As more organizations became unionized and the cost of recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality employees increased, competition for the best and brightest employees also rose. Employers began to realize that the strategic management of their most valuable and expensive asset, their employees, was the key to business expansion and, eventually, successful globalization (Armstrong, 2006).

The modern discipline of “Human Resource Management” has expanded to multiple strategic people-management activities, including recruitment and hiring, training and development, compensation and benefits, development of employee policies, employee accommodation, diversity and inclusion, and the never-ending adaptation to the changing legislative landscape as it applies to employees and employers (Rotich, 2015). Additionally, the COVID pandemic of 2020-2022 created an increased demand for qualified Human Resource (HR) professionals to manage the ongoing accommodation of individual health needs, shifting to an online work model, providing mental, emotional, technological, and physical support for employees, and trying to maintain corporate cultures -- all while still supporting strategic business initiatives that were also rapidly changing in response to the pandemic (Collings et al., 2021; Harbert, 2021).

Despite the progress HR professionals have made toward earning a strategic ‘seat at the table’ in terms of organizational leadership roles, there is still room for improvement. A 2023 BambooHR study indicates that more than one-quarter of top companies still do not have any HR representation in the C-suite (BambooHR, 2023), indicating there may be little or no HR input into many critical business decisions. Even if there is an HR presence at the highest levels of organizational leadership, the person filling the role may not have any formal HR education or credentials. The BambooHR research report also indicated that most HR professionals have degrees in a generalized business or management course of study, beating out specialized HR degrees by just over a 3-1 ratio (BambooHR, 2023).

In contrast, monetary settlements and other costs resulting from harassment and discrimination charges are at an all-time high throughout the nation and across nearly every industry (EEOC, n.d.a). Many employees are refusing to return to the workplace post-COVID, and not only because they appreciate the new-found workplace flexibility. A 2022 article in the *Harvard Business Review* indicated that one of the top attractors for black women about working from home is the respite they receive from harassing, sexist, and discriminating behavior they must endure in the office (Williams et al., 2022).

Considering that laws prohibiting workplace discrimination are old, well-established legal principles, one would think we’d have eradicated issues of harassment, discrimination, equal pay, etc., but we have not. Perhaps one cause of this problem is the lack of formal HR education requirements in core business curricula in U.S. business schools. This study examines core business curricula for required HR courses and HR topical content, identifies the U.S. public universities that do require an HR course in the business core, and makes recommendations for further research.

In the sections that follow, I will discuss the history of the study of Human Resource Management (HRM), how business school curricula are established, the influence of programmatic accreditation on curriculum design, faculty qualifications to teach HR, the prevalence and importance of core business curricula, HRM content in non-HR courses, the current state of HR violations and the costs associated with them, my research structure, and, finally, the results of my study.

**Background**

**The Study of Human Resource Management**

The field of Human Resource Management is a part of the overall Management discipline and has a similar development timeline. In 1948, following in the footsteps of professional organizations in the United Kingdom, the first professional association for human resource professionals was founded as the American Society for Personnel Administration (Obedgiu, 2017). This society was renamed in 1998 to the Society for Human Resource Management and is now the largest professional human resource management association in the world, with over 300,000 members in 165 countries (SHRM, n.d.).

The first institution of higher learning to offer university education in workplace studies was the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University in 1945 (Cornell University, 2023). The field of HR education has expanded significantly since then, with the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics reporting 123 public U.S. universities offering an undergraduate degree in fields relating to Human Resource Management, including executive/career coaching, HR Development, HR Management and Services, HR Management/Personnel Administration, Labor and Industrial Relations, and Labor Studies (NCES, 2023).

**Establishing Curricula in Higher Education**

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) defines an undergraduate bachelor’s degree as an award generally requiring at least four but not more than five years of full-time equivalent college-level work. Most undergraduate business curricula require between 120 and 130 credit hours, depending on overall university and programmatic requirements (NCES, 2019). Every university must determine its unique curriculum and course offerings, as prescribed by the DOE.

Determining what majors to include in business degree programs is a balancing act every higher education institution faces. Business schools must offer programs that draw enough students to support the program's cost, be able to recruit and retain qualified faculty to teach the courses, and meet the constantly changing needs of the business community. HR management degrees are frequently offered as a concentration, specialization, or major under the general umbrella of a Management or Business Administration degree.

University curricula are determined by several factors, including state and local governments, societal trends, political maneuvering by various stakeholders, university ownership and leadership, accreditation, and specialization areas offered by various schools (Hanh et al., 2021). Universities also have general education requirements that cover a breadth and depth of educational topics, including math, science, government, history, and English, which state governments and accrediting agencies dictate.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) oversees the accreditation of higher education institutions to ensure that students receive the quality education they are paying for. Institutions of higher learning must be accredited by a DOE nationally recognized accrediting agency for students to be eligible to receive any federal student financial aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The DOE has recognized these accrediting bodies as “reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by the institution of higher education” and maintains a list of these institutional accrediting bodies on its website (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Examples include the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

In addition to the nationally recognized accreditation, many universities seek out and maintain programmatic accreditation from agencies specializing in various subject matters. These programmatic accreditations help to establish educational standards in particular fields of study, which strongly determine the curriculum in those areas. Three major accrediting agencies accredit business degree programs in the United States.

* **Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)**
Synonymous with the highest standards of excellence since 1916, AACSB provides quality assurance, business education intelligence, and learning and development services to over 1,850 member organizations and more than 950 accredited business schools worldwide (AACSB, 2023).
* **Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP)**
Founded in 1988, the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) is a global business education accrediting body and the first organization to offer accreditation to all levels of collegiate business educational degree programs from associate to doctoral (ACBSP, 2023).
* **International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE)**The International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE) . . . was founded in 1997 in response to the expressed needs of higher education administrators, business program leaders, and faculty who wanted an accreditation process that was mission-driven and outcomes-based (IACBE, 2023).

While each programmatic accrediting body has differing requirements, universities that achieve accreditation must demonstrate they have met the requirements of the accrediting body through a rigorous evaluation of management practices, learner outcomes, societal impact, and continuous improvement. As a part of the accreditation process, curriculum review and the review of measured student learning outcomes are required. During the process, the participating business school undergoes an intensive self-study to determine the effectiveness of the programs it offers. The self-study is then further evaluated by independent site reviewers and accrediting body approval committees. The processes for each type of accreditation are lengthy, time-consuming, and costly, but they are a strong indicator of the quality of business education a student could expect to receive from an accredited business school.

The programmatic accrediting bodies do not dictate to business schools which courses are required in the curriculum, but they encourage both breadth and depth of curricular choices, as well as adequate administrative, financial, university, and community support for each program. The goal is to ensure that students receive the highest quality business education possible, regardless of their major fields of study. Business schools seeking programmatic accreditation commit to ongoing self-evaluation, continuous improvement, and regular reviews by independent reviewers. Although the accrediting bodies do not require specific courses in the business core, there may be an impact on curriculum choices resulting from self-study and assessment, and recommendations about best practices. Further research into the influence of programmatic accreditation on curriculum choices is needed to determine how much impact these accrediting bodies might have.

Finally, the curricula for some fields of study, such as nursing and accounting, are strongly dictated by government licensing and regulations. For example, CPA licensure in some states requires the coverage of specific topics in ethics courses that are unnecessary for other business specializations. California, Colorado, Texas, and West Virginia are examples of states with the most stringent rules concerning topical coverage in the curriculum relating to ethics (Horne et al., 2022).

**Core Business Curricula**

Due to the need to produce economies of scale, most U.S. public universities have created a required core curriculum for all students in the business programs (Bunch, 2020). The curriculum includes fundamental business introduction courses and courses considered essential to any business education, such as business communication, business ethics, and business law. These core courses tend to make up between 24-40 course credits of the entire curriculum, and the remaining course credits in a degree plan are comprised of major requirements, electives, and general education requirements.

Core curricula are not new and have “become a commodity that is almost identical from school to school” (Shinn, 2022, para. 6). It is so common that those universities not utilizing a business core are typically highly specialized educational institutions offering exclusive educational opportunities, such as the California State University Maritime Academy (2021), which only offers one business degree, and the Colorado School of Mines (2023) that offers a STEM-heavy degree, focused on analytics in their B.S. in Business Engineering and Management Science. Table 1 describes variations of typical business courses required in a core business curriculum. This data was collected through direct examination of core business courses and catalogs on the websites of U.S. public university business schools.

**Table 1**

*Typical Core Business Courses*

| Common Course Title | Catalog Description |
| --- | --- |
| Introduction to Financial Accounting | “The study of concepts and procedures for preparation of general purpose financial statements using generally accepted accounting principles” (East Central University, 2022, p. 210). |
| Introduction to Managerial Accounting | “Accounting information from the perspective of management users with an emphasis on data accumulation for product costing, planning, and performance evaluation and control” (Oregon State University, 2023, p. 1910). |
| Introduction to Microeconomics | “Nature, method, and scope of economic analysis; economic scarcity, resources; specialization and trade; supply and demand; price and output determination in the product and resource markets; market structures; costs and profits, income discrimination, inequality, poverty; externalities and public goods” (Minot State University, 2023, p. 269). |
| Introduction to Macroeconomics | “Cash flow and financial statement analysis and fundamental managerial accounting principles related to product costing and use of information in organizational decision-making” (University of Louisiana at Monroe, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| Business Law | “A study of the various processes available to resolve business disputes and an exploration of complex legal relationships that affect business, including contracts, business formations, employment, and torts and consumer law” (Slippery Rock University, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| Business Communication | “Students will obtain the knowledge and ability to use writing and oral communication skills in a professional environment to effectively persuade others and to mobilize action among various organizational stakeholders” (University of Akron, 2023, p. 734). |
| Information Systems | “This course introduces the student to computer information science and its applications. The student develops literacy in the computer and its uses” (Fitchburg State University, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| Principles of Marketing | “This course introduces the principles of marketing, particularly those applicable to micromarketing” (Lander University, 2023, p. 381). |
| Principles of Finance | “The organization of corporations in modern business; growth of the business organizations; current financing, insolvency, receiverships, and reorganizations” (Western New Mexico University, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| Principles of Management | “Introduces the basic concepts and processes of management including the study of the legal, social, and political environment with an emphasis on the behavioral perspectives in organizations” (Dalton State University, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| Business Statistics | “Introductory principles and methods in data analysis, probability, and hypothesis testing together with their applications to business” (University of Michigan-Flint, 2023, Undergraduate Online Catalog). |
| *Note:* Universities have unique variations on course names and descriptions. |

Each curriculum choice is nuanced for respective universities, based on its individual learning goals for students. For example, some universities moved Economics courses into the overall social sciences general education curriculum, such as Alabama State University (2018) and The University of Toledo (2020), thereby creating room in the business degree plan for further specialization in business fields. Contrarily, other universities house Economics within business programs and offer it as an option in general education social science courses to non-business majors. Decisions like this tend to be determined by various factors, including university focus, degrees offered, faculty availability, and political maneuvering for resources.

Additionally, there is a history of sharp contrast between what business schools offer and require and what organizations need from graduates (Ellson, 2009; Reibstein et al., 2009). This contrast is partly due to different emphases on how business schools versus business measure success. Bennis and O’Toole (2005, p.98) stated:

“Instead of measuring themselves in terms of the competence of their graduates, or how well their faculties understand important drivers of business performance, business schools measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research which is largely not grounded in actual business practice.”

This difference in priorities further frustrates the curriculum process because, as business schools compete in the market for students and donors, the need to show the relevance of curriculum choices is a critical struggle. In a 1983 research study, Dickinson, Herbst, and O’Shaughnessy asked the question *What are Business Schools Doing for Business?* The results lamented the perceived disconnect between business and education regarding business needs versus educational outcomes for students. David et al., revisited this earlier work again in 2010 with their paper of the same title, examining the marketplace to study improvements to the disconnect (or the lack thereof). The latter study found that the disparity between what employers need and what business schools provide remained an issue in 2010 and suggests that “business schools should revise their mission to become more practitioner-oriented” (David et al, 2010, p.59).

More current research offers progress, but there is still room for improvement in data literacy, teamwork, critical thinking, and the application of concepts learned in school to real-world situations (Pothier & Condon, 2019; Schartel et al., 2021). In a post-pandemic environment that forced a shift in the way business schools approach curricular design, online educational options require new evaluation methods and curricular choices rather than a traditional focus on a “curriculum that is research-informed, theoretically driven and based on empirical evidence” (Rosenbaum et al., 2021. p. 553). There is a class of “new educational providers diluting this formidable competitive advantage by focusing their curriculum on providing learners with practical skills that are linked to employability outcomes” (Rosenbaum et al., 2021. p. 554). These universities are refocusing their curriculum to be competency-based, such as the University of Wisconsin System, which provides students with credit for prior learning and allows them to prove that they have mastered identified competencies in their chosen field of study (Team, 2021).

**HRM Content in Non-HRM Business Courses**

To ascertain if the level of Human Resource Management (HRM) education currently required in core business programs is sufficient, one must first establish the current coverage of HRM topics in required core business courses. The coverage of HRM topics typically included in other-than-HRM classes was assessed through the evaluation of primary textbooks and syllabi currently used in university business schools. The textbook sample was collected by analyzing a sample of syllabi from public U.S. business school courses in Principles of Management, Business Ethics, and Business Law to determine which textbooks are commonly used.

Table 2 displays a brief topical analysis of these texts which indicate that they typically offer one to three chapters of information concerning HRM-related topics. Some texts provide only a passing mention of HRM subjects. While faculty can certainly influence how much emphasis is given to HR topics in these non-HR courses, students not required to take an HR Management course as a part of the core business curriculum are not likely exposed to further HR Management education. Fertig and Joseph (2022) also evaluated popular Principles of Management and Organizational Behavior textbooks for topical content, confirming minimal exposure to Human Resource-related topics in these required core business courses. Therefore, students who may eventually be responsible for administering employment law, conducting interviews, and managing employees may never be exposed to this critical information.

**Table 2**

*Topical Assessment of HRM Coverage in Business Ethics, Business Law, Principles of Management, and Organizational Behavior Textbooks*

| Course Name | Textbook Evaluated | Coverage of HRM Topics |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Business Ethics | Business Ethics: Ethical Decision Making and Cases 13th ed. (Ferrell et al., 2022) | Parts of two chapters |
|  | Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk about How to Do It Right 8th ed. (Trevino & Nelson, 2021) | Parts of three chapters |
|  | Organizational Ethics: A Practical Approach 5th ed. (Johnson, 2022) | Parts of two chapters |
|  | Business Ethics: Managing Corporate Citizenship and Sustainability in the Age of Globalization 5th ed. (Crane et al., 2019) | One chapter |
| Business Law | Introduction to Business Law 7th ed. (Beaty et al., 2023) | Three chapters |
|  | The Legal Environment of Business: Text and Cases 11th ed. (Cross & Miller, 2021) | Three chapters |
|  | Business Law: Text and Cases 15th ed. (Clarkson & Miller, 2021) | Two chapters |
|  | Business Law 18th Ed. (Prenkert, 2022)  | One chapter |
| Principles of Management | Management: A Practical Introduction 10th ed. (Kinicki & Soignet, 2022) | One chapter |
|  | Management 13th ed. (Griffin, 2022) | Part of one chapter |
|  | MGMT 12th ed. (Williams, 2022) | Two chapters |
| Organizational Behavior | Organization Theory & Design 13th ed. (Daft, 2021) | No HR coverage |
|  | Organizational Behavior: Managing People and Organizations 13th ed. (Giffin et al., 2020) | No HR coverage |
|  | Essentials of Organizational Behavior 3rd ed. (Scandura, 2022) | No HR coverage |
|   | ORGB 6th ed. (Nelson & Quick, 2020) | Three chapters |
|  |

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), postsecondary institutions (both public and private) in the United States awarded 387,851 bachelor’s degrees in Business-related fields, including Management, Marketing, and related support services (which would include HR Management) in 2019-2020 (NCES.ed.gov). This is 19% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the same year, more than any other area of study, the next closest being health professions and related programs, with almost 13%. Such a large percentage of all degrees awarded indicates that businesses depend on business graduates, and the quality of education students receive could directly impact organizational success or failure in the long run.

**Knowledge Transfer and Content Exposure**

We know that the more frequently students are exposed to new and valuable information, the more likely they are to retain it (Ditta et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2001). Fink (2007) provides a framework of six categories that are critical for deep learning:

* Foundational knowledge: The information we want students to understand and retain.
* Application: The ability to accurately apply the information they are learning.
* Integration: The ability to integrate information from across disciplines to solve problems.
* Human dimension: The personal significance of the acquired knowledge.
* Caring: When a student changes their perspective because of acquired knowledge.
* Learning how to learn: Establishing life-long learning habits.

“The premise is that any course can address all six of these general kinds of learning. And the more of all six the course can promote, the more significant will be the overall learning experience for the student” (Fink, 2003, p. 14). Since I’ve already established that the coverage of Human Resource Management topics within business core curricula is both foundational and minimal outside of HRM-specific courses, it would follow that deep learning of these topics is likely not occurring. The lack of repetitive learning and practice opportunities concerning HRM topics makes it less likely that students will retain what little HRM information they are exposed to in core business courses (Cunningham et al., 1984; McKeachie et al., 1987; Bonwell & Edison, 1991; Snyder, 2003).

**Faculty Qualifications and Experience Required to Teach HRM**

Accrediting agencies have different requirements for various types of faculty members, and teaching at the collegiate level requires a minimum educational level on the instructor's part. To teach at the bachelor’s level, instructors must have a minimum of a master’s degree with 18 graduate hours in a specific degree field and documented business experience in that field of practice. More commonly, faculty are expected to have a terminal degree in their teaching field, maintain and produce a peer-reviewed publication agenda, and have experience in the business field they teach (Bureau of Labor Services, 2021).

Because HRM is considered a sub-category of the Management discipline, those faculty hired to teach HR-related courses typically have at least a master’s degree in a management discipline, but may not possess any legitimate HRM training, experience, or credentials. Candidates often include ‘HR Experience’ on a resume or CV if they have ever been involved in any aspect of an HR function such as recruitment, interviewing, selection, etc., even if that experience is minimal. In addition, many university leaders who hire faculty to teach HRM courses (particularly the introduction to HR courses typically required in core curriculums) may also be unfamiliar with specialized HR knowledge and confuse general management experience with specialized HR experience. They are not the same.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) both offer HR-specific certifications for HR professionals that are rigorous, based on science and research, and reflective of the body of HR knowledge necessary to navigate a career in Human Resource Management in organizations.

SHRM is the largest HR professional organization in the world and has been offering multiple levels of certification since 2014 (SHRM.org). It offers competency-based, entry- and senior-level certifications based on the SHRM Body of Applied Skills and Knowledge (BASK), in addition to a number of specialized certifications. According to the SHRM Website:

The BASK was developed through a series of large-scale research studies that incorporated the viewpoint of thousands of HR professionals from around the world. It was most recently updated in 2021, and now includes nine behavioral competencies as well as one technical competency.

The BASK is also used to guide HR educators in the development of HR curricula at the undergraduate level. To this end, the Society for Human Resource Management also recognizes those university HRM degree programs aligned with the SHRM Body of Applied Skills and Knowledge (BASK). This recognition provides guidance to prospective students so they can be assured that the leading HR professional association recognizes the degree program they seek as a high-quality program designed to help them succeed (SHRM, 2022). By aligning the HR curriculum with the SHRM BASK, the business school gains credibility in the marketplace and the alignment can be used to support continuous improvement activities for regional accreditations.

SHRM’s leadership in the industry and support for HR professionals in the field through continuing education opportunities, networking, and certification ensures that those professionals who carry the certifications have sufficient experience in the field and knowledge of HR content to operate successfully in the business world.

The Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) has been offering HR certifications since 1976, and until 2014, when SHRM started offering certifications, HRCI was considered the premier organization for HR-related certifications. They still provide several levels of certifications and eight global certifications to HR professionals but do not offer curricular guidance for the alignment of curriculum to their certification offerings (HRCI, n.d.). Business schools do not always require professional certifications for HR instructors as they might for accounting instructors (such as a CPA license). However, the lack of certification means that the instructor likely does not have sufficient HR experience to educate students in HR principles and practices. Both the SHRM and HRCI certifications require advanced education, work experience, and a broad knowledge of the discipline of Human Resource Management. If business school leaders don’t know about or understand the importance of HRM certifications, they are unlikely to ensure that faculty staffing decisions are made with these in mind. Even more, the consistent involvement of faculty in local and national HR professional organizations helps ensure that faculty are educated on the ever-changing laws and regulations concerning employees, helping to expose students to internship opportunities, continuing education, and mentorship relations that can carry them throughout their careers.

In terms of the issues that HR professionals deal with daily, the failure of business schools to hire HR professionals with specific and intentional HR education, certification, and experience as instructors and professors could set students up for failure in the workplace because they simply do not know any better. The legal and financial implications of HR decisions concerning employees have the potential to provide an organization with growth, productivity, high morale, and employee retention- or they can destroy them.

Increasingly, universities depend on adjunct faculty because they offer budgetary relief to cash-strapped programs (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Since approximately 70% of all postsecondary faculty are now adjunct or part-time, lower-level, introductory business courses are assigned to adjunct faculty to free up tenured and tenure-track faculty to teach upper-level specialization courses that support their teaching area expertise and research agenda (Spinrad et al., 2022).

Considering the typical requirements for adjunct business faculty teaching Principles of Management, Business Ethics, and Business Law courses, the adjunct faculty member may have little significant work experience or exposure to Human Resource Management topics and may be unable to offer students personal anecdotes and professional experiences. When this happens, the importance of the knowledge of HRM naturally diminishes for students. Even if a board-certified attorney teaches Business Law classes, their exposure to employment law may be minimal unless they specialize in that specific law practice. While they may have more knowledge than adjuncts without law degrees concerning HRM, they may also be restricted by the Business Law textbook curriculum assigned to them. As previously discussed, the coverage of HRM topics in Business Law textbooks is minimal, so adjunct faculty (regardless of qualifications) may stick to a curriculum that inhibits further HRM education.

If the faculty member teaching these core courses does have a background or formal education in HR, the students in those courses may have increased exposure to HR content, but again, it is not a situation where the faculty can afford to spend too much time on the topic because they are equally obligated to cover the other required topics of the course.

**Educational Relevance of HRM**

The rapid rate of change in business and technology has led to an equally rapid rate of curricular change in business school curricula (AACSB, 2009). As business schools scramble to deal with the real issues of the ability to recruit and retain qualified faculty, the shifting of the classroom to online formats, changing student and market perceptions about the value of business education, and the power of choice that students now have in choosing an institution of higher learning as a result of greater access to technology, “Business schools today face the challenge of relevance aimed at them by the stakeholders they purport to serve” (Donovan, 2017, p. 837).

Garner et al. (2019) confirmed this perspective: “On one side of the debate are employers: some, but not all, express dissatisfaction that college students are not job-ready when they earn their diploma and expect university education to be akin to job training” (p. 440). Additionally, a 2016 study from the Hart Research Associates on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities surveyed 400 employers having at least 25 employees who have either an associate or bachelor’s degrees and found “just 23% of employers say that recent college graduates are well prepared with it comes to having the ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings and 44% rate them as not that or not at all prepared” (p. 6).

**Awareness of Risk**

If business students are not required to take classes concerning employment law and HRM issues, they may inadvertently expose their employers to unnecessary liability. In a New York Times article, Robert Prentice (2002) reported some of the biggest business scandals of our time are due not only to lapses in ethical judgment on the part of employees but also because “participants had an insufficient knowledge of, appreciation for, and yes, fear of the law. Business schools have played a role in this disaster” (NYTimes.com).

Since a lack of knowledge of the law does not excuse illegal actions and behaviors on the part of employees, it would follow that business schools should find it imperative to integrate courses in core business curricula that provide students with a solid foundation of employment law in classes that can reduce or eliminate legal risk for organizations. However, since Human Resource Management is included under the umbrella of Management rather than as an independent curriculum, undergraduate business students may not be adequately exposed to “threshold concepts” in HR (Donovan, 2017, p. 839).

Maatman, speaking during a 2017 webinar, said, “Solid HR fundamentals remain among the best defense mechanisms to identify and resolve workplace problems that often grow into class actions” (Seyfarth.com). The inclusion of Human Resource Management courses that provide emphasis on federal employment laws, legal and illegal hiring practices, diversity and inclusion, and overall knowledge about things that legally can and cannot be said to employees could provide students with the knowledge they need to avoid claims of discrimination, disparate impact, disparate treatment, harassment, and the creation of hostile work environments. If a business student graduates without gaining a working knowledge of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Equal Pay Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, how can they be expected to avoid making grave errors that impact morale, employee relationships, recruitment and retention, and diversity initiatives within the workplace?

**The Current State of HR-Related Violations**

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) collects a wide variety of data concerning the financial impact of discriminatory behaviors by employers. For fiscal year 2021, the EEOC received 61,331 discrimination charges in the United States (EEOC, n.d.b). This number does not reflect state or local charges, only those filed federally. The same data set indicates that in the past ten years (2011-2021), the EEOC has received nearly a million (924,878) charges of discrimination (EEOC, n.d.b).

The EEOC reports also provide information about case resolutions, settlements, and financial awards to victims. Over the same 10-year period, the EEOC achieved 79,417 settlements and collected $3,842,900,000.00 in monetary benefits (EEOC, n.d.a). This dollar amount does not include monetary benefits obtained prior to filing a charge with the EEOC or through litigation, only those obtained through mediation and settlement within the EEOC process.

From 2011-2021, the EEOC litigated 1854 discrimination cases for $589,000,000.00 in damages awarded to victims, for an average of nearly $60 billion annually (EEOC, n.d.c). Again, these numbers do not reflect private settlements and litigation that the EEOC is not involved in, state and local settlements and litigation, and class action suits filed by groups of employees against a private employer. For example, in 2020, class action settlements reached $1.58 billion in that year alone (Maatman et al., 2023).

Discrimination, harassment, and retaliation claims are not the only HRM issues that could land an employer in court and result in financial liability. Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) violations, Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) violations, and Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act violations also impact an employer’s bottom line (Maatman et al., 2023).

But it isn’t only about financial losses due to settlements or litigation. A 2021 meta-analysis focused on the prevalence of workplace mistreatment indicated that “an average of 34% of employees experienced mistreatment and 44% of employees witnessed mistreatment” of other employees (Dhanani et al., 2021, p. 1082). This same study revealed that the costs to employers due to the mistreatment of employees in terms of absences related to sickness and productivity loss range “from $691.70 billion to $1.97 trillion annually” (p. 1082).

Previous literature on the impact on employee morale, physical health &well-being, mental health, and overall satisfaction has indicated that employers and educators have long been aware of the effects of discrimination, poor management practices, and inadequate employee policies on both the employee and the employer (Hirsch & Kornrich, 2004; Kerdpitak & Jermsittiparsert, 2020). These policies and practices result in financial detriment to the employee and employer in terms of billions of dollars every year, a negative brand image aggravated by social and other media, and unhappy employees who are unconcerned by a loss of customers, to say nothing of the negative impact on the victims and their families.

Considering a company’s bottom line alone, one would think that employers would demand that all business students receive a basic education in Human Resource Management, but the problems of discrimination and other HR-related violations continue to be an ongoing risk for employers. However, a 2009 study by Hirsch indicated that while direct legal intervention may coerce establishments that experience charges, sanctions, or the threat of further legal action to improve their employment practices, not all establishments are subject to enforcement activity. Even among establishments that face charges, the vast majority walk away unscathed; four out of five avoid monetary payouts, personnel adjustments, and mandated policy changes and can return to business as usual following the charges. Moreover, while charges introduce the threat of further legal action in the form of litigation, less than 1 percent of all charges lead to lawsuits.

So, despite substantial evidence in both the literature and in the law, employees in management and leadership either don’t know the law or simply do not think the risk of lawsuits is high enough to worry about HRM issues, or perhaps they simply do not know what they do not know.

**The Study**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate curriculum requirements in undergraduate business degree programs at public universities in the United States to determine how many require a Human Resource Management course of any kind in the core business curriculum, as identified in Table 2.

**Population and Sample**

A list of public 4-year universities in the United States was obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics, and the resulting information was filtered to display only the university name, location, and if they offer any undergraduate degree.

The search returned 752 public universities with undergraduate degree offerings. After eliminating those universities that don’t offer business degree programs, those with non-operational websites, and those whose catalogs and websites did not provide the curriculum information or it was behind a firewall so that the information could not be verified, 507 public university business degree programs were evaluated from the original list.

The data was obtained by visiting the websites of each of the 507 public universities in the United States and reviewing the core curriculum listed on the website and in university catalogs or bulletins. A spreadsheet was created to track and analyze the data. The following data were gathered from each website:

1. University Name
2. Business degree offering
3. Courses in the core curriculum
4. Regional accreditation (if any)
5. Identification of HR course in the core curriculum
6. Web link directly to relevant curriculum pages of each university

**Results and Discussion**

The research results were sobering, considering the costs of HRM-related complaints, litigation, and other risks related to business professionals' lack of HRM knowledge. Table 3 displays the results.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Universities Requiring an HRM Course in the Core Business Curriculum* |
| Programs Evaluated HR Course Required Percent |
| 507 |  |  | 39 |  |  | 7.69% |

After gathering and reviewing the data, I was surprised to learn that so few universities require an HRM course in the business education core curriculum. At just under 8% of the public universities surveyed, this indicates that most public business schools have not yet determined that HRM is important enough to be included in core business curricula but is instead delegated to specializations, concentrations, majors, or as supporting or elective courses in a management degree program. The universities that do require an HRM course in the core business curriculum do not seem to have any similarities apart from this factor that would indicate a particular type of business school or program is more or less likely to have the requirement, apart from a nod toward business schools that earn programmatic accreditation. The schools are located all over the country, the sizes of the universities vary greatly, and each business school has distinct core business curricula, degree offerings, and educational approaches. The universities that do require an HRM course in the core business curriculum are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Business Schools Requiring an HRM Course in the Core Business Curriculum*

| Institution Name | State | Institution Name | State |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Austin Peay State University | TN | Northern Vermont University | VT |
| Bridgewater State University | MA | Purdue University-Main Campus | IN |
| California State University-Chico | CA | Shepherd University | WV |
| California State University-Sacramento | CA | South Carolina State University | SC |
| Central Michigan University | MI | Stockton University | NJ |
| Colorado Mesa University | CO | SUNY Buffalo State | NY |
| CUNY Medgar Evers College | NY | SUNY College at Potsdam | NY |
| Delta State University | MS | SUNY Empire State College | NY |
| East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania | PA | SUNY Polytechnic Institute | NY |
| Eastern Oregon University | OR | The University of Montana-Western | MT |
| Fort Hays State University | KS | The University of Texas at Dallas | TX |
| Georgia Gwinnett College | GA | University of Alaska Fairbanks | AK |
| Georgia Institute of Technology-Main Campus | GA | University of Arizona | AZ |
| Georgia Southern University | GA | University of Baltimore | MD |
| Indiana University-East | IN | University of Wisconsin-Green Bay | WI |
| Mayville State University | ND | University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh | WI |
| Michigan State University | MI | University of Wisconsin-Platteville | WI |
| Millersville University of Pennsylvania | PA | West Virginia State University | WV |
| Mississippi Valley State University | MS | Western New Mexico University | NM |
| North Carolina State University at Raleigh | NC |  |  |

The research revealed that programmatic accreditation significantly affects the likelihood that a business school will require a Human Resource Management course in the core business curriculum, considering that 61% of business schools that do require an HRM course in the business core also have some form of programmatic accreditation. Since the programmatic accreditation requires that each university assess learning outcomes for their stated student learning goals, it may be that those business schools found a greater need for HRM education in their programs or perhaps were influenced by business leaders serving on advisory boards and influencing curriculum choices. This is an area for further research and discussion with the accredited business schools.

Table 5 describes the programmatic accreditation breakdown of the business schools requiring an HRM course in the core as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 5** |  |  |
| *Programmatic Accreditation Breakdown of Evaluated Business School Curricula Requiring an HRM Course in the Core Business Curriculum* |
| Programmatic Accrediting Body | Universities with Programmatic Accreditation |
| AACSB | 18 |
| ACBSP | 4 |
| IACBE | 2 |
| No Programmatic Accreditation | 15 |

The research also upheld the previously discussed information concerning core business curricula. Only 4% of the business schools evaluated had no identified business core curriculum. These business programs were at universities that have unique program offerings, such as The Evergreen State College in Washington (2023), which offers self-designed programs of study, or programs that only provide a minimal number of degrees, such as the University of Maine at Machias (2023) that only offers one business degree (a B.S. in Business and Entrepreneurial Studies).

The research results indicate that a disconnect between the needs of employers and the focus of business school curricula remains an issue. Still, it is unclear if business school leaders are even aware of the potential impact the lack of foundational knowledge of HR-related topics could have on graduates and their future employers. The faculty who teach introductory HR courses in the universities listed in Table 4 come from a variety of education and work backgrounds, and while some have HR specialty credentials, the majority of the required HR courses are taught by a faculty member who has either higher education in HR or specific HR experience, but generally not both. A gap in the literature for HRM education shows that little inquiry has been made into the impact of introductory HRM courses on students’ future business decisions. A longitudinal study to measure the impact of exposure to high-quality HR education from qualified HR faculty members could determine if that education minimizes risks for those students in their future jobs and could provide more detailed data than is currently available.

**Opportunities for Further Research**

There are multiple opportunities for further research related to this topic. I am expanding this research by evaluating syllabi and course content for multiple core business courses at universities; specifically, I am considering Principles of Management, Organizational Behavior, and Business Law, to determine topical HR coverage. Additionally, I am evaluating business core curricula at private universities to determine if they are more likely to require an HR course in the core business curriculum than public universities. It could also be beneficial to research this topic from the perspective of risk management, especially in terms of a longitudinal study comparing students who take an HR course to those who do not. Finally, further research could be developed to determine the influence of programmatic accreditation on curricular choices.

**Conclusion**

Education is the key that turns the lock to opportunity. Educating all business students about their rights and responsibilities, the employer’s rights and responsibilities, and the risks associated with harassment, discrimination, and retaliation could be the opportunity for our businesses to finally begin to turn away from old policies and practices that no longer serve our diverse society. Since business school graduates will eventually be responsible for managing and growing their respective organizations, exposing a broader business school student population to critical HRM information that could protect employers and organizations makes sense.

Providing real-world examples of what discrimination looks like in the workplace, empowering students to speak up when they see behaviors that make them uncomfortable, asking good questions, thinking critically about what employers are saying and why they are saying it, and giving business students a foundational knowledge of information that will help to keep their future employer out of court are necessary to a foundational HRM education for any business student.

Since business schools have the autonomy to determine which courses they include in their core curricula, it is recommended that they include an introductory course in Human Resource Management taught by a qualified faculty member with at least a master’s degree in an HR field, and ideally who has practical experience in the field. Qualified faculty who teach HRM courses should be leading the charge to educate their peers and other university decision-makers about the importance of HRM education and the potential risks and costs that could be eliminated for employers if students are required to complete an HRM course as a part of their core business curriculum. Furthermore, professional HR associations at the local, state, and national levels must advocate for more HRM education in business schools. Finally, we must ensure that business schools recognize both the need and the potential for a significant positive impact resulting from a relatively minor change in requirements. The potential return on investment for this decision can be measured by comparing the business performance of students who are required to take an HRM course with those who are not.

Developing an introductory HRM course that covers the essential elements that all employees and employers need to be aware of, rather than the broad and shallow overview of general HRM topics typically offered in introductory HRM courses, is another practical extension of this research. Business schools can provide a more fully developed core business curriculum by identifying the most critical HRM skills that all business students need to be effective organizational leaders. Then, students are better prepared to operate successfully in an increasingly litigious business environment.

Is HRM education the only solution to the problems of workplace discrimination, harassment, and retaliation? Of course not. These workplace issues have deep roots which will take more to resolve than education alone. However, we might begin by educating the next generation of business professionals with the information they need to know to avoid discrimination. Hopefully, we can empower more business leaders to lead fairly and without bias because they have received at least a cursory introduction to Human Resource Management.

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