Are We Really That Different? Examining Departmental Differences

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This project began as a comparative study of the differences in two departments on campus, the Department of Management and Quantitative Methods and the Sociology and Anthropology department. I planned to talk to administrators and department heads to collect records and financial information. Due to difficulties in setting meeting with these people, I decided to talk to students to see why they had chosen their major in these two departments and to see if their perceptions of their departments differed. In addition, I collected publically available information on the departments to see if department goals matched with the student expectations.

Methods

I began by looking at the websites of each of the schools and respective departments. This led me to compare mission statements of the Management and Sociology departments. I felt that it was important to find out what the curriculum each department set out to teach their students. This information was also found on the web sites.

The comparison of professor’s salaries was important in this study. The salaries are public information and I accessed them at the library. This was done by compiling a list of all the salaries from both department and then averaging the numbers and comparing the differences.

The major findings in my research were done through interviews. I sat down with x# of students from the Management Dept and x from the Sociology and Anthropology department. My interviewees included 3 males and 3 females. Two of these students were sophomores and the other four were seniors. Interviews allowed me the opportunity to ask them why they were in the major that they were in, do they like it and why are they in college. The information gathered from these interviews is the backbone of my study.

Findings

Every department in every college sets out to accomplish a mission. This dictates the entire program. This includes how and what the professors can teach, how the students experience the school and why students choose that particular program. The mission statements that are presented by departments are carefully worded and revised multiple times because this statement is of great importance in presenting the department to the public. This is the departments chance to sum up why they are in campus and why a student or a professor should come to that particular college. This is the comparison between the Management & Quantitative Methods Department in the College of Business and the Sociology Department in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Sociology has a mission statement that at first glance one would think that it must be very to the point because it seems short. The very first bullet point is aimed at helping “students learn, understand, discover and apply knowledge about sociology” This matches with the first bullet point of the Management. Both are offering an environment that will allow students to learn in the best way possible. This is where the similarities end.

The next bullet point for the Sociology department is for creating the good environment for students to be comfortable with professors “both inside and outside the
class room.” This point seems to be promoting community that will allow for students to grow to their potential and to share the responsibility of their education. This is much different from the next points from the Management department. The next bullet point form this mission statement has to do with using the newest technology in teaching and communication between students and the professors. The Sociology department is promoting a responsible learning atmosphere and the Business Management is promoting a technologically knowledge able student body.

The students are left out of the rest of the mission statements from both departments. This is also the last bullet point from the Sociology Department. This last point is for the professors. This encourages and rewards the professors to work in their fields of interest and strengths. The Management department echoes the idea of promoting professors development. The first three bullets are very similar and seem to be very calculated. These departments and all other departments would probably be required to have something similar in the first three statements and these would no doubt have to go through an approval stage. This may be similar to the case of a resisted student organization (RSO) and their bill of right. The RSOs are given document that has certain required statements that they are to fill out to describe their organization. The university no doubt has some control over what is said in these mission statements because similar wording is used in both mission statements in their first three bullet point.

The Management department continues on with two more bullet points in their mission statement. These statements are very specific to the business world. The first is to “target and promote” their college in these markets. The last bullet point is to “build and maintain partnerships with key constituents.” These points are very much business driven and the mission is clear. They want the college to be widely recognized in the business world, not just so that students have opportunities after they graduate but so that they may attract professors form the business world that would bring more prestige to the department and promote the schools name in the real world.

The missions of the departments are similar. They want to allow students to grow and learn in the best way through a optimal environment, the students should have open lines of communication with the college and feel comfortable doing so and the professors are to serve the students in the best way possible and are to excel in teaching, scholarship, and service. After these three main points the Management department goes further to assure those who are reading this that they are out in the business world promoting the college and that if one were to participate in the department that their would be connections to the outside business world.

Along with the mission statements there is a description of the curriculum. There will obviously be a difference in the classes that are offered in these two departments but the reasoning for the curriculum is something that should be brought to out attention. The Management department emphasizes theory, practical application and networking opportunities. The main idea of this curriculum is real world application and job training. The Sociology department’s curriculum and reason for teaching this way is different. This department promotes an academic application. The thought processes are emphasized rather than specific job training.

Another difference between departments is compensation or salaries of professors. Professors are an integral part in the college experience. I needed to know what the pay for the average professor was in each department. The exact pay of each professor is public
knowledge and is kept at the library. I averaged the salaries of both departments. This average included professors, assistant professors and associate professors. This would allow me to observe how the school keeps the most qualified professors for the departments. The Management Department average yearly mean salary is $119,586. The Sociology Department average yearly mean salary is $80,676. These numbers include the professors, associate professors and assistant professors salaries. This is an almost $40,000 difference between the departments. This has to do with the real world influences on the university. The Sociology professor has a limited selection of jobs outside of academia. This means that there is little chance that the Sociology professor is going to be lured away from the university by some high paying job else where. This is much different for the Management Department. The professors in this college hold very socially valuable knowledge. That is not to say that sociologists don’t but business knowledge is much more marketable. The Management Department must keep their salaries high enough to keep these professors from entering into the business world.

I interviewed David, a sophomore Management major, in a cafeteria on campus. The first question I asked was why he had chosen his major. “I choose it because there are opportunities in more fields. You get communicate with more people and you get to use your leadership. There are just a lot of opportunities in more than one specific area. If one area fails then there are others to fall back on.” Next, was what he found most valuable about his major. “The most valuable thing about my major is the networking. It’s how you get a job.” He did not know what he wanted to do with his major after school and that was his justification for being in a major with “opportunities.” His lack of specific direction may be due to the fact that he is a sophomore and that he really has no idea as to what he would want to be doing in the future.

Matt is a senior International Business and Management major. He is a double major and much further along in the academic process than David. This is what he told me about why he chose his major. “Well, I knew that I was business oriented. Also, I knew that picking something in business would be safe. There are a lot of benefits of international business. I picked up my second major which is management because I found out that I could do it by only adding a few more hours to my schedule and come out with a double major and still graduate in 5 years.” Again here is the idea of choosing business as being safe and a good choice because it will likely lead to a job after graduation. Matt echoes that the skills that a student gets in Management are directly applicable to the business world but adds that the skills are also useful in life. ‘Definitely with organizational leadership teaching the importance of being a good leader and the qualities of being a good leader are applicable to anything in life. And, with the way the world is changing these days, having a background and a degree in international business will help me deal with that change” He seems to have a much more rounded idea of what he is learning in business and how that applies to his life in general. He does stresses the theme that what he is learning will directly help him get a job.

The last Management major that I interview was Mary, a sophomore. The conversation began like it had with all the other Management majors. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I wanted something that would let me get a job after school. I didn’t want something specific.” There is that theme of nothing specific but skills that are directly transferable to the career market and that would be valuable to an employer. This is where she began contradicting herself. She mentioned that she had feelings of “missing out” on
other aspects of academia by only having a broad array of business classes. She didn’t have
the freedom to take other classes that interested her because they wouldn’t count towards
her degree. “Yeah, I feel that it has forced me in one direction.” This is why there are
majors, so that people can specialize in a certain field but within that field Mary seemed
unhappy about the requirements and unclear to their purpose. “I don’t feel that the
requirements as are beneficial at all. Why do I have to take certain classes, like Accounting,
I think that it is ridiculous. I have a business English class that I have written 3 papers for a
total of 75 pages. I would much rather have the option of taking an internship instead to get
real world experience.” This multitude of classes that are required are obviously there to
make a student a more rounded business major and learning theory and the basic skill are
necessary but not my Mary’s standards. She brings up very valuable points. What better
way to be prepared for the real world that to have learned and worked in it already.

She has an interesting answer as to why she feels that Management and the
Business department in general are important. “Oh, I have a good answer for this one. I get
to learn how to work in the business world but also how to live in the business world. I
know how to negotiate, get insurance for myself because I know what all the terms mean
now, I could be able to finance a car, it has helped me a lot with the practical means of the
real world. I get to learn the broad strokes of the business world.” She previously stated
that she wanted to be able to take different classes that would round out her education more
fully, yet she seems to feel that what she is learning is very valuable for her future career
possibilities and for her life. This is probably attributed to her age and position in her
academic career but she seems torn between learning and absorbing college for all that is
has or learning to become a highly marketable employee.

The Management majors all seemed to agree that what they were learning was
something that will be very valuable to them in the future. That future that they all stress
was career focused. The majority of the aspects that they described to me as being
important were important because it made them marketable in the business world. There
were contradictions. They all chose something that they felt was broad and would allow
them to choose from whatever they wanted as far as a career. I feel that by choosing
Management they have limited themselves to the corporate world. The skill that they will
be learning will be directed to be marketable. This is what the Management mission
statement contains. These people are being molded into these “well-defined markets.” This
is what they all states as being important; starting a career as soon as possible and with
their highly marketable skill and the department’s dedication to marketing their students
they are well on their way to their career goals.

The Sociology majors seemed to have a different view of education. Sara is a senior
sociology major. She describes why she chose sociology as, “My mom majored in
sociology and I grew up with the idea of seeing the world as a result of social factors. I was
always interested in how social factors affect life and I like writing so it works for me.”
This is may seem different from the Management students but as discovered from talking
to the Management students they all have someone in their lives who works in the business
world. Sara’s situation is different because of the people that I spoke with she was the only
one that was influenced by someone in their family to study sociology. The discussion of
jobs or future in sociology is where the conversation differs form Management. “Yeah, I
enjoy it even thought getting a job with it isn’t that great. You pretty much have to go to
grad school. The program is good and the professors are great but there really isn’t any
individual direction. There are topics that I am interested in and I have to do that research on my own instead of having a class for it. But, yeah I enjoy it; it makes you a well rounded person.” There is the knowledge that this major won’t make you irresistible to an employer but the idea of being a “well rounded person” is important to her. Though unlike in Management there is some want of a specific direction, where in Management it seems to come with a specific direction. She responded to my question of why sociology was a valuable major as, “Sociology is valuable because it trains your mind to think critically. You learn to research. You can see social situations from a different perspective. There is a lot of group work, presentations and research. It allows you to go into the work force or grad school with a broad set of skills. Plus, you can relate to people better when you can see things from a different aspect.” There is first the stressing of the thinking critical aspect of sociology and then the discussion of how the skill sets learned would be useful in the real world.

Liz is a senior sociology major. She described why she was a sociology major was, “because in junior college I took a sociology class and it was my favorite. Also, I wanted something that had a lot to offer, like a wide variety of jobs. Not just something specific. Also, it sounds so lame, but I want to help people. I want to work with underprivileged people.” This has as to do with a career choice but it first began with an interest in the subject. She like Sara acknowledges that with the skill set learned that there is no specific career path that she needs to follow. “It would be nice to have a specific skill though.” This is interesting because unlike Management that teaches you skill and says this is where you can use this. Sociology is lacking in that specific skill area. She does agree with what Sara said about the value of sociology, that it “gives you a different outlook.” After the interview questions were over Liz, Sara and I met back up to leave and so that I could clear up any further questions about the study and they both brought up interesting points about what a Sociology degree really gives a person looking to go into a sociologically related field. Liz said, “I want to be able to go and help people now. I have the heart and mind to do it but I don’t have the skills. The skill that I have they hire locals to do that. The stuff that they need in these areas requires certain skills. I would have to work at a not for profit for 5-10 years before I would be able to get a job that I really want.” Sara followed with “Yeah, your experience shapes the jobs that you can get not the sociology degree.” This is telling of the experience of sociology major. They seem to be trained how to think and analyze but when leaving college those skill are not marketable on the job market. This is similar to the complaint that Mary had, that the school should offer internships to get real experience rather than just learning about it.

Dan is a senior sociology major. His interview was short and to the point. In asking why he choose his major he responded, “the reason why is because I used to be a psychology but I had too many hours by the time I actually applied to the major. So, I was looking at the classes that I liked and the next semester after that I took a sociology class in Latino studies.” He like Liz had taken a sociology class and like it so they choose it. I this case though the university policy kept a student out of their first choice and forced them into something else, though he said that he was satisfied with his situation. He also states similarly to both Liz and Sara when asked about the value of his major. “It’s valuable because you get a view of reality of our world and how society shapes how people act and think. You get to realize how the world is constructed.”
The sociology majors all had similar reasons as to why they liked their major and as to why they felt that it was valuable. They felt that it changes the way that you see the world and that is something that was valuable to them and to others around them. The issue of jobs or lack there of in this field was never instigated by myself and was usually brought up quickly. These people know that they are getting into something that is not marketable outside of academia yet they are in it still. Why? They all stated that being able to think critically and to look at the world through different lenses was important to them. Two of the people I interviewed chose the major outright because it was a way that they could attain at least the mental skills, not experience, in the field that they want to eventually enter into. The other fell into it because of university policy but still could see the value in the major.

Conclusion

There is definitely a difference of overt motivation for why someone would choose Management over Sociology or vice versa. The reasons are clear for someone in the “real world.” Business skills will get you that job out of school and you will make more money. Even if you come back to college and teach you would make a considerable amount more than in another field. Sociology is a less understood by most people outside of academia in my experience and therefore does not carry as much social value. Though everyone that I talked with knew how or had a plan of how they could take what they had learned and turn it into a career. College has become a place to learn a skill set that is necessary to be qualified for a job. In the class time that is spent learning a skill or theory that a student does not see as useful to their future career they think of it as a waste of time. This is true across all majors. There are differences between these departments but that is why they are two departments not one. One is focused on producing students with a clear set of applicable skill to a workforce that they are involved. The other department is focused on teaching the students a thought process and a less visible or understood skill set that would be best used to get in to grad school rather than a business position. Students are similar to a point but what they consider important will determine their major choice. In Sociology it is to gain a different world view and to do research. In Management it is to gain the skills to begin a career in the business world and to begin networking for those positions.

Given the results of this preliminary research, I would recommend that the university have a more comprehensive internship program. The Sociology students mentioned that there were very limited opportunities through the university for internships that would be beneficial towards their education. The Management department would benefit from a similar program. All of the students wanted more real world learning opportunities and they would benefit from such opportunities in addition to their course work. The Sociology department needs more of a specific curriculum, meaning that students could be able to focus on specific areas of study or specific issues. The students who have specific interest in this major are forced to create their own course of study. My major realization is that students from either major want “job” training. The students are here to gain knowledge that will allow them to get a job once they graduate. The complaints from students as far as curriculum and their experience at Illinois State is that they want more real world training so that they can get the job that they want.

Future study of this subject is necessary. I have only scratched the surface of this issue and the university needs to have a firm grasp on why students are in certain majors,
what they expect from the university and suggestions for improvement from the students. As a student doing the research I was able to get students to talk to me in a way that they would not talk to the university. This exact study could be continued with more students or students from a wider variety of majors. In the Sociology department there is a career course that was not mentioned by my interviewees and that is in need of further study because if the department is attempting to aid students in finding a career but it seems to go unnoticed or is ineffective. This is area of study and the method by which it is studied is extremely important for the university. The student conducted studies give the university a different vantage point of the people that attend the school and their expectations and suggestions that could save the university years of trial and failure in their decisions for policy and curriculum.