

Academic BRASS

Published by the
BRASS Business Reference in Academic Libraries Committee

Vol 1(3), December 2003

Elisabeth Leonard
Head-Reference; Business & Economics Librarian
Wake Forest University

Weighing the Benefits of an MBA: Survey Results

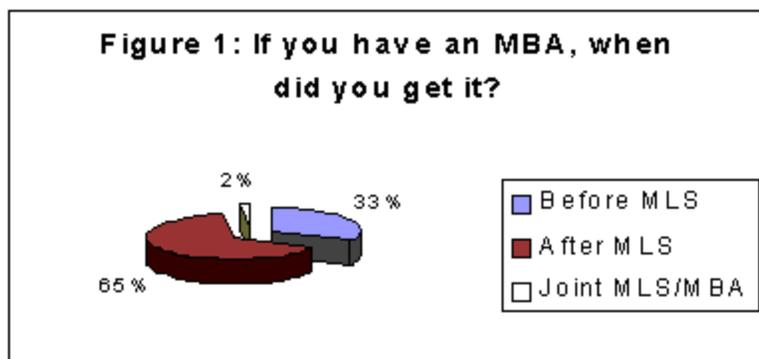
I remember sitting in a business reference class in library school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The professor, Dianne Strauss, had brought in three business reference librarians to talk to the class about what it was like to be a business librarian. What a treat! I had gone to library school to become just that, a business librarian. My only question for the panel, one that had been on mind since I started the MLS program, was "Do any of you have an MBA and would you recommend one?" Only one had an MBA and none thought the MBA was necessary, nor did they recommend it.

Since that time, I have graduated library school, become a business librarian, and earned an MBA. I am now the one answering the question, "Do you have an MBA and would you recommend one?" To better answer the question, I surveyed three lists, BUSLIB-L, BRASS-L and SLABF-L in hopes of gathering advice from other librarians who had earned an MBA. I received 200 responses. The results are provided below.

SURVEY RESULTS

The first question asked was if the respondents already possessed an MBA. 10 of the respondents, 5%, were enrolled in an MBA program, 6% had begun an MBA program, but decided not to complete it, and 44 of the 200 respondents, 22%, reported they had an MBA. This corresponds to Pagell and Lusk's research, who found that 23.5% of librarians had an MBA. [1](#)

Most respondents with an MBA, 65%, received it after becoming a librarian (see Figure 1). Interestingly, 3 respondents were in the process of getting an MBA, but did not have an MLS, 16 or 8% had an MLS and were in the process of getting an MBA, but 50 respondents, 25%, said they wanted an MBA.



The benefits reported for having an MBA were numerous, with increased subject knowledge receiving the most responses of being very beneficial, 43 responses ² or 74%. Distant runners-ups were promotions, increased amount of respect from patrons, or students or faculty, increased amount of respect from colleagues, and the provision of career opportunities outside of librarianship (see Table 1). An alternate view on the ability to use the MBA to leave librarianship came from a respondent who said, "Career-changing was not really viable for me. At the time I graduated, MBA employers wanted either a kid straight out of school willing to work infinite hours, or a person with what they perceived as relevant (non-library) experience."

Table 1: Benefits of an MBA

If you have an MBA, what do you see as the benefits?

	Not beneficial	Somewhat beneficial	Very beneficial	Not Applicable	
Increased subject knowledge	3% (2)	2% (1)	10% (6)	74% (43)	10% (6)
Made me a better manager	4% (2)	20% (11)	24% (13)	29% (16)	24% (13)
Made me a better leader	6% (3)	15% (8)	34% (18)	28% (15)	17% (9)
Made it possible for me to get a promotion	12% (6)	12% (6)	19% (10)	40% (21)	17% (9)
Increased the amount of respect and/or credibility I receive from faculty	2% (1)	11% (6)	15% (8)	41% (22)	31% (17)
Increased the amount of respect and/or credibility I receive from students	2% (1)	4% (2)	22% (12)	39% (21)	33% (18)
Increased the amount of respect and/or credibility I receive from patrons (assuming your patrons are not students or faculty)	2% (1)	24% (12)	24% (12)	29% (15)	22% (11)

Increased the amount of respect and/or credibility I receive from colleagues	4% (2)	22% (12)	28% (15)	33% (18)	13% (7)
Increased my salary	13% (7)	21% (11)	28% (15)	26% (14)	11% (6)
Provides career opportunities outside of librarianship	7% (4)	7% (4)	31% (17)	39% (21)	15% (8)

Of the seven respondents who stated that the MBA was not beneficial, reasons provided were:

- It cost too much money (57.1%).
- It took too much time to complete (28.6%).
- It wasn't as relevant as expected (14.3%).

While it is often thought that receiving an MBA will open the door to new careers or lead to higher level positions within libraries, one respondent noted, "The MLS in conjunction with an MBA is not necessarily beneficial, but had I started out right after college with an MBA it might have helped me get entry level work in marketing. The MBA/MLS combo does not help with better library jobs or with better non-library jobs." The idea that timing is important was echoed by another respondent, "I got my MBA while I was in Human Resources, long before I decided to become a librarian, so my focus was totally different."

All respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments. Some were addressed to the issue of should librarians pursue an MBA. While Pagell and Lusk state that "...in general, academic business librarianship is still a women's profession, but the MBA is considered a 'male degree,'" ³ I would argue that the reasons for deciding not to pursue an MBA are more about a person's career and personal lifestyle choices than perceptions of the masculinity of an MBA. This was echoed by the respondents.

For instance, one person wrote, "In my opinion the need for an MBA depends upon the librarian's background of education/experience and the community of patrons that they are serving." Another submitted, "As far as my company is concerned, there wouldn't be much benefit in me getting an MBA. They could care less. If I got my MBA, management would say, 'That's nice.' But it would have no effect on my career. It's just not that important here. I'm proud of my MLS, but I also felt it was a necessity in order to get a job in this profession. The MBA isn't, and I don't know that I'd have the time or energy anymore to pursue another master's."

Other respondents proposed alternate degrees or certifications, ranging from a CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst), to Masters' degrees in Public Administration or Economics. Others believe that an undergraduate background is sufficient, as is proposed by this respondent, "I never bothered with the MBA but did, after securing a job as a business librarian take undergrad courses in areas such as accounting, business law, economics, etc. so that I would better understand basic business principles. That seemed to be sufficient in allowing me to communicate with and understand the needs of business researchers."

CONCLUSION

It is heartening that I am not alone in pursuing an MBA, nor am I alone in believing that the benefits outweigh the costs. However, many people wrote that although they are interested in an MBA, the financial cost is too high and that it takes too much time to complete. As was true for some respondents, my degree was provided as a benefit of working at my institution. The administration saw it as professional development. Pursuing any degree has costs associated with it, we must each decide if those costs are worth bearing. For the business minded, this is classic cost benefit analysis. Does the time it takes, the money it costs, the effort that must be made, outweigh the benefits received?

Like the respondents, my subject knowledge has greatly increased. I understood the questions that were asked at our reference desk before I had the MBA, but I understand the answers better now. I do believe that the MBA has improved my ability to communicate with our students and faculty, who are very proud that I have the degree. It has also enabled me to make positive contributions toward the planning and implementation of library services. That brings us full circle. What do I say to library school students or colleagues considering a second masters degree? Would I recommend the MBA ? I agree with many of the respondents that it depends on your situation and your goals. It was a stressful program to pursue while working full-time, but I learned more than can be quantified. The program I was in emphasizes team work, leadership, creativity, and ethics. Surely these are useful skills for us all.

REFERENCES

1. Pagell, Ruth A. and Edward J. Lusk. "A Professional Photo of Academic Business Librarians Worldwide: The Present Picture and Future View" *Journal of Business and Finance Librarianship*. 6(1) 2000: 3-21.
2. 58 people responded to this question, although only 44 people had responded that they had an MBA. The difference may be that people who had been in an MBA program or were currently enrolled also responded to the question.
3. Pagell, Ruth A. and Edward J. Lusk. "A Professional Photo of Academic Business Librarians Worldwide: The Present Picture and Future View" *Journal of Business and Finance Librarianship*. 6(1) 2000: 3-21.