

Rethinking the MBA: Business Education at a Crossroads

A published study presented at the 2010 AACSB International Deans Conference by Srikant M. Datar, senior associate dean, director of research, and Arthur Lowes Dickinson Professor of Accounting at Harvard Business School.

(2010). April 22. Datar, S. M., Garvin, D. A., Cullen, P. Rethinking the MBA: Business education at the crossroads. HBS Press.

During the first plenary session of the 2010 Deans Conference, Professor Srikant M. Datar, senior associate dean, director of research, and Arthur Lowes Dickinson professor of accounting at Harvard Business School, presented the findings from the book *Rethinking the MBA: Business Education at a Crossroads*, co-authored by Srikant M. Datar, David A. Garvin, and Patrick G. Cullen. The book brings together research conducted over three years, drawing on extensive interviews with business school deans and business executives, comparative analysis of MBA curricula, and in-depth portraits of institutional responses at the course and program levels to changes in the business school environment.



Datar opened the session by outlining a number of the significant challenges currently facing MBA programs, including the decrease in enrollment in many two-year, full-time MBA programs (particularly at mid-ranked schools), the rise of alternatives to the two-year full-time MBA, declines in student engagement, and a rise in external and internal criticism of the degree's content.

In response to these challenges, Datar outlined the core argument that runs through the book by using a framework that was originally developed at West Point to describe the essential components of business school education: knowing (or knowledge), doing (or skills), and being (or a sense of purpose and identity). The book argues that business schools need to reassess the facts, frameworks, and theories that they teach (the “knowing” component), while at the same time rebalancing their curricula so that more attention is paid to developing the skills, capabilities, and techniques that lie at the heart of the practice of management (the “doing” component), and the values, attitudes, and beliefs that form managers’ world views and professional identities (the “being” component).



Within this framework, Datar provided examples of MBA courses that address areas of need that deans and executives had identified. For example, in the knowing domain, the Critical Analytical Thinking course offered at the Stanford Graduate School of Business trains students to think critically and communicate clearly. In the doing domain, the Multidisciplinary Action projects at Michigan’s Ross School of Business trains students to recognize organizational realities and overcome implementation challenges. In the being domain, the Leadership and Corporate Accountability course at Harvard Business School develops leadership skills by helping students to understand the responsibilities of leadership, develop approaches to inspiring and influencing others, and recognizing the impact of one’s behavior on others.

Datar concluded the session by suggesting that the demands on MBA programs have brought them to a crossroads at which they have to reconsider their value proposition. This requires business schools to take a broader view of their graduates’ responsibilities to multiple stakeholders, and to provide their students with a deeper understanding of such phenomena as globalization, leadership, and innovation, as well as the ability to think critically, decide wisely, communicate clearly, and implement effectively.