



THE HR/IR TEACHING CONFERENCE

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This article summarizes and analyzes the 1996 Innovative Teaching in Human Resources and Industrial Relations (HR/IR) Conference. It deals with the (1) origins, content, and format of the conference; (2) key trends, ideas, and themes that emerged from the conference; and (3) implications from the analysis for the next HR/IR teaching conference (scheduled for June 1999). Special attention is paid to the different disciplinary approaches to teaching HR/IR, newer nontraditional methods for teaching HR/IR, and practitioner influence on HR/IR teaching and research. © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Introduction

On June 7th and 8th, 1996, a conference on "Innovative Teaching in Human Resources and Industrial Relations" (HR/IR) was held in Atlanta, Georgia. Hosted by Georgia State University and the W.T. Beebe Institute of Personnel and Employment Relations, the conference apparently was the first to be devoted to the teaching of HR/IR at the undergraduate and graduate levels in colleges and universities. The conference attracted more than 200 HR/IR academics as well as practitioners from the United States and abroad.¹

In this article, we begin by briefly reviewing how the 1996 HR/IR teaching conference came into being, describing the process by which the conference participation and content were determined, and summarizing the main formats used at the conference. Next, we examine certain of the key trends, ideas, and approaches to teaching HR/IR that were

represented at the conference. Finally, we draw some implications from analysis of the 1996 conference for the next HR/IR teaching conference.

Origins of the 1996 HR/IR Teaching Conference

The seeds of the 1996 HR/IR Teaching Conference were sown at a meeting in 1994 of the University Council of Industrial Relations and Human Resource Programs (UCIRHRP), a consortium of 84 universities with HR/IR programs. A proposal for an HR/IR teaching conference was presented to the UCIRHRP by Professors Bruce Kaufman and David Lewin, who had been discussing the idea for such a conference with colleagues from universities in the U.S. and abroad.² The proposal emphasized using the conference as a forum for sharing HR/IR course content; teaching methods; the uses of technology in the class-

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room; different disciplinary perspectives used by faculty to teach HR/IR; and the integration of human resources with industrial relations topics, concepts, and applications.

Members of the UCIRHRP vigorously discussed and debated this proposal. Several Council members observed that the academic conferences they attended were devoted solely to the presentation of research papers and findings. An HR/IR teaching conference, they further observed, would deal with and potentially enhance the other major activity in which they engage professionally, namely, the teaching of HR/IR. A substantial portion of the Council's discussion focused on the scope, timing, and location of the conference with a variety of alternatives presented in these respects. At the conclusion of this discussion, it was decided that the HR/IR teaching conference would be held in 1996 in Atlanta, Georgia, with Georgia State University playing the host role; and that the conference should be as inclusive as possible in terms of topics, types of sessions, and participation of attendees. Members of the UCIRHRP then voted in favor of and to formally sponsor the first HR/IR teaching conference. They also charged Professors Kaufman and Lewin with organizing and codirecting the conference, forming a Conference Advisory Board, and seeking other institutional sponsors for the conference.

Over the next several months, a Conference Advisory Board was formed consisting of Professors Allison Barber of Michigan State University, John F. Burton, Jr. of Rutgers University, John T. Delaney of the University of Iowa, Marianne Koch of the University of Oregon, Randall Schuler of New York University, and Philip Way of the University of Cincinnati. A formal invitation to participate in the conference was prepared and widely distributed to academic institutions and individual faculty. Advertisements soliciting participation in the conference were also published in several leading academic and practitioner journals. Recipients of the invitation were invited to submit proposals for workshop, panel, roundtable, demonstration and/or interest group type sessions as well as research papers on HR/IR teaching and were promised a 15-day turnaround with respect to the acceptability of their submissions (August 1,

1995 was set as the deadline for receipt of proposal submissions). More than 60 separate proposals were submitted to the conference organizers, each was reviewed by two members of the Conference Advisory Board, and 45 of the proposals were ultimately accepted.

Simultaneously, the conference organizers proceeded to solicit the sponsorship and financial support of organizations other than the UCIRHRP for the HR/IR teaching conference. These efforts yielded the following conference co-sponsors: Society for Human Resource Management, Industrial Relations Research Association, Academy of Management (Human Resource Division), Academy of Human Resource Development, and University and College Labor Education Association. Further, luncheon speakers for each day of the two-day conference were secured; hotel lodging, meeting room, and information technology arrangements were completed; and the conference program was finalized.

The first day of the conference began with an introduction and a plenary session on "What Companies are Looking for in HR/IR Students", followed by two sets of seven concurrent sessions, a luncheon speaker, two more sets of seven concurrent sessions, a set of eight concurrent sessions, and nine interest group meetings. The second day of the conference began with an introduction and a plenary session on "HR/IR Skills and Competencies: Program Supply v. Market Demand", followed by a set of seven concurrent sessions, another set of seven concurrent sessions, a luncheon speaker, three consecutive sets of seven concurrent sessions, five informal roundtable discussion groups, and a summary and conclusions session.³

Key Trends, Ideas, and Approaches to Teaching HR/IR

A major trend in college and university level HR/IR programs, curricula, and courses, much in evidence at the conference, is the growing emphasis on HR—human resource management—and de-emphasis of IR—industrial relations.⁴ This trend, in turn, reflects the influence of several factors, including the decline of work force unionization in the United States and most other advanced industrial

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nations, the rise of human resource strategy as an area of theory and research, the demands of employers/practitioners for graduates trained in human resource management, expanded regulation of the employment relationship in areas other than union-management relations, and perhaps most notably the increased use of faculty trained in organizational behavior to conduct HR/IR research and teach HR/IR courses. Further reflective of this trend is the fact that virtually all of the undergraduate and graduate level degree programs that at one time exclusively carried the IR label have changed to HR/IR or HR programs.

Despite this trend or perhaps because of it, there is a variety of disciplines for and approaches to teaching HR/IR courses, including the basic or "first" course in HR/IR programs. This variety was most strongly reflected in a concurrent session at the conference on "Different Approaches to Teaching HR/IR in MBA Curriculums". Professor Randall Schuler of New York University (NYU) presented a combined strategic behavioral approach to teaching the basic HR management course in the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) Program at NYU's Stern School of Business. That course begins with sessions on using HR for competitive advantage, linking HR strategy and objectives to business strategy and objectives, and developing an HR staff-line manager partnership. Thereafter, the course deals with methods for and approaches to motivating employee performance, and covers such topics as job design, developing a pool of job applicants, selecting and placing employees from the pool, socializing and training employees, performance appraisal, and direct and indirect compensation and rewards. Schuler's HR course also emphasizes team/group-based student work, with approximately 70% of a student's grade based on a group case analysis, a group industry and HR analysis project, and group in-class participation.

Probably the strongest emphasis on business strategy as the basis for HR strategy and practice is reflected in the HR management course taught by Professor Fred Foulkes in Boston University's MBA Program. In this required second-year course, concepts of business and HR strategy are presented and

discussed at the outset. Students then apply these concepts to several cases and exercises, and each student is required to interview an HR executive of a company and prepare a report on the content of the HR executive's job. These reports then become "cases" for discussion in subsequent class sessions. About three-quarters of a student's grade is based on individual and group case analyses and the report on the content of an HR executive's job.

In the basic HR management course in North Carolina State University's relatively new MBA Program, Professor Steven Allen emphasizes labor market theory and institutional analysis. His course begins with an examination of external and internal environmental forces, notably technological change, that influence job and work force composition as well as HR practices. He then takes up performance measurement, HR planning, recruitment, selection, work force diversity, and employment security. Much of the rest of the course focuses heavily on compensation (at the individual, group, and executive levels) and fringe benefits, and the course concludes with the topic of collective bargaining. In Allen's HR course, student grades are based entirely on individual work, with midterm and final examinations accounting for 50% of the grade. Nevertheless, as with Schuler, Allen uses (roughly) one case in each class session of the HR course.

In the HR/IR course in the MBA Program at the University of Toronto School of Business, Professor Anil Verma focuses on global HR management and industrial relations. In this instance, global HR management involves comparisons of HR practices, industrial relations systems, and regulation of the employment relationship among Canada, the United States, and selected European nations. Considerable emphasis is placed on changes in HR/IR practices as influenced by legislation, institutional arrangements, and management and union strategies. Student teams participate in a collective bargaining simulation and about a half dozen cases are used in the course. Student grades are based approximately 60% on individual work and 40% on team/group work.

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the integration of economic and behavioral frameworks of analysis. As examples, the economic concept of an explicit contract is paired with the behavioral concept of a psychological contract; the economic concepts of efficiency wages, free riders, and team monitoring are paired with the behavioral concepts of participation and empowerment; and the economic concepts of principal-agent theory and perverse incentives are paired with behavioral concepts of performance appraisal and performance management. These and other concepts are applied to eight cases, an in-class exercise, and a negotiation simulation. In this course, about 70% of a student's grade is based on individual work, the remaining 30% on team/group work.⁵

Despite the differences in conceptual and analytical approaches to HR/IR reflected in these courses, there are some notable similarities among them as well. Perhaps the strongest similarity is in the use of cases, exercises, projects, and/or in-class simulations for applying HR/IR concepts and frameworks. This similarity, in turn, seems to reflect the desire of both faculty and students to demonstrate that HR/IR concepts and frameworks can be applied to so-called real-world business and management problems (keeping in mind that the courses described here are offered as part of MBA curricula). Also notable (with the exception of Allen's course) is the use of team/group-based work, especially for case analysis, projects, and simulations. This, in turn, may reflect the growing use of teams/groups in the workplace and more broadly for organizational decision-making.

Indeed, and with respect to approaches to teaching HR/IR, a key theme that emerged from the first HR/IR teaching conference was that *"nontraditional" teaching methods have been widely adopted and will be even more widely used in future*. What is meant by non-traditional teaching methods? To answer this question one must first ask and answer the question, "What is the traditional teaching method?" The answer to this question is, of course, the lecture method. To go by the presentations and discussion comments at the conference, the lecture method for teaching HR/IR is in decline at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In place of the lec-

ture method, and as noted earlier, cases, exercises, in-class simulations and projects are often used in HR/IR courses. Yet, these methods themselves may also be considered somewhat traditional, as reflected in the titles of the following selected papers on teaching methodology presented at the conference:

- "Computer Based Simulations in Compensation Courses"
- "Understanding the Business Impact of HR/IR Policies: A Simulation Model"
- "Use of the Computer in Teaching Collective Bargaining"
- "Integration of the Internet in HR/IR Instruction"
- "Establishing a Learning Resource on the World Wide Web"
- "What Does the Internet Contribute to Teaching HR/IR?"
- "Creating a Paperless Classroom"
- "Integrating Classroom and Workshop Training"
- "A Multi-National Distance Learning HRD Graduate Program"
- "Experiences Implementing a Distance Learning Program"
- "A New Course: Moot Court in HRM"
- "Use of Arbitration Cases as Teaching Materials"
- "Tying Theory to Practice: Student Analysis of a Company's HR System"
- "Applying Lessons Learned from Employee Involvement to the Classroom"
- "Just Cause in the Classroom: Practicing What We Preach"
- "Using Teaching Evaluations to Teach About Performance Appraisal"
- "Peer Review of Student Writing in HRM"
- "Experiences with a Field Research Course in HR/IR"
- "Student Debates as a Learning Tool"
- "Creating a Video Teaching Tool from a Live Event"
- "Developing Live Cases for Labor Relations Courses"
- "Using the Final Exam Matrix as a Teaching Guide"
- "Circumventing Constraints on Non-traditional Teaching Methods"

As these titles indicate, HR/IR teaching faculty members are incorporating computing technology, the World Wide Web, multi-media, course/student data, live cases, company-specific practices, and other methodologies and techniques into their courses. With these developments, it is hardly surprising that the traditional lecture approach to HR/IR course instruction is giving way to newer, more contemporary instructional approaches—or, as some would say, learning approaches. Stated differently, nontraditional teaching methods tend to treat students in the classroom as a learning community, whereas traditional teaching methods tend to treat students as the objects or recipients of faculty instruction.

Another key theme (or conclusion) that emerged is that *business practitioners are deeply interested in the content and teaching approaches of HR/IR courses and curricula*. This was reflected in the conference's opening plenary sessions on days one and two, respectively, "What Companies are Looking for in HR/IR Students" and "HR/IR Skills and Competencies: Program Supply v. Market Demand"; in the luncheon presentation on day one by Rex Adams, former Vice President, Employee Relations and Vice-President, Administration of Mobil Corporation, who emphasized the importance of a business-faculty partnership in the development of HR/IR core competencies among HR/IR professionals, other staff specialists, and line managers; in the titles of several conference presentations, for example, "Identifying Skills and Competencies Needed by HR/IR Practitioners", "Incorporating Intra-management Perspectives in the HR Strategy Course", "Effective Use of Internship Programs and Advisory Boards", and "A New Course: Human Resource Strategies for Entrepreneurial Firms"; and perhaps most of all in the presentation by representatives of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), who described the SHRM Foundation's program of support for research proposals and doctoral dissertation grants aimed at "developing standards of practice and performance for the HR profession". Analytically, the strengthening of practitioner interest in HR/IR course content and pedagogy may be said to reflect the widespread belief (in practitioner and academic circles) that the

effective use of human resources is a potential source of competitive advantage for the modern business enterprise.

Implications of the 1996 Conference for the Next HR/IR Teaching Conference

How widespread are the aforementioned (and other) nontraditional approaches to teaching HR/IR? The answer to this question is "we don't know" in as much as there is no national (not to mention global) data base, clearinghouse, or repository of HR/IR course content, teaching methods, etc. The development of such a data base, clearinghouse, or repository presents both a challenge to and an opportunity for HR/IR teaching faculty and practitioners. Hence, this is a key topic for inclusion in the next HR/IR teaching conference.

How effective are nontraditional approaches to teaching HR/IR, both in absolute terms and in comparison with traditional teaching approaches? Again, the answer is "we don't know" because so little HR/IR research deals with teaching in general or with various teaching methods in particular. A useful starting point for undertaking research on this topic might well be the development of baseline knowledge or core competency requirements for students upon completion of the first course in HR/IR (at the undergraduate and/or graduate levels). Here, too, is a key topic for inclusion in the next HR/IR teaching conference.

What tangible, demonstrable benefits accrue from strengthened linkages between HR/IR practitioners and HR/IR faculty? As the presentation by SHRM representatives at the 1996 teaching conference indicated, these linkages have both research and teaching dimensions, yet both are ultimately aimed at improving the core competencies of HR/IR (and other business) professionals. Once more, the answer to this question is "we don't know". To develop a better, more informed answer to the question requires additional research into HR/IR practitioner-faculty linkages, HR/IR practitioner influences on the content and teaching methods used in HR/IR courses, and more systematic analysis of the relationships between the knowledge taught-learned-supplied in HR/IR courses and the HR/IR knowledge demanded by

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gia State University and the W.T. Beebe Institute of Personnel and Employment Relations. Hopefully, that conference will take up some of the topics recommended for inclusion in this article as well as the many other ideas and topics submitted by academics and practitioners bound by their common interest in HR/IR teaching innovation and effective HR/IR professional practice.

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ENDNOTES

1. A complete list of conference attendees is available on request from the authors.
2. At the time of this presentation, David Lewin served as President of the UCIRHRP.
3. A complete listing of conference sessions, presentations, and articles is available on request from the authors.
4. Support for this conclusion and trend was contained in several of the presentations at the 1996 HR/IR teaching conference, for example, J. Bovin and A. Giles, "Strategic Directions for Industrial Relations Programs"; R. Heneman, P. Benham, T. Halkyard, and T. Schmidt, "Challenges and Trends in HR/IR Programs: Views of Program Directors"; P. Way, "A Survey of HR/IR Curricula: Common Features, New Directions"; and B.E. Kaufman, "Evolution of the HR Function: Implications for University Programs".
5. These and other approaches to teaching HR/IR are, of course, also reflected in HR/IR research. See, for example, D. Lewin, D.J.B. Mitchell, and M.A. Zaidi. (1997) *The Human Resource Management Handbook*, Parts I, II, and III. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.