Research on

What's happening in the academic world in HRD? Who's doing the research, what are they studying, and how are they going about it? Researchers researched research; here, they report on the results.

By Anne D. Toppins

Who's doing the academic research in HRD? Let's take a look at the standard profile. In colleges and universities, the average researcher is a male in the field of education. He is either a graduate student or a professor. As you might expect from an educator, his research focuses on some aspect of training and development. His research is not funded. The method he uses to study his topic is descriptive rather than experimental.

That's what a recent study of academic programs showed. The study, sponsored by the HRD Professors' Network and funded by ASTD, was designed to determine the current status of research in HRD. The network sent surveys to the programs listed in the ASTD national academic database; it received information about 135 research projects. The responses suggest wide variance in the definition of HRD research and many differences in interpreting terms common to research literature.

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The survey

The survey asked the contact person listed at each institution to report the current HRD research of faculty members and graduate students. The institutions that did not respond to the first mailing received follow-up letters. Of the 213 programs contacted, 72 responded. Ten of the programs reported no current research. The rest provided information on a total of 135 projects; those data provide a good profile of current HRD research in academia.

The survey instrument asked what areas of human resource practice were involved, the research methodology, the focus of each project, the major topics of literature reviewed as background material, and the findings or projected outcomes of the research. The instrument also requested funding information and basic demographic data on the researchers.

Eighty-eight (65 percent) of the projects were reported by male researchers, 33 (24 percent) were reported by females, and 14 (10 percent) were undesignated.

Figure 1—Area of human-resource practice for HRD research

	Number	Percentage
Training and development	85	36.2%
Human resource planning	23	9.8%
Compensation or benefits	6	2.6%
Personnel research and information systems	7	3.0%
Organization development	35	14.9%
Selection and staffing	23	9.8%
Employee assistance	7	3.0%
Organization or job design	16	6.8%
Union and labor relations	5	2.1%
Career development	27	11.5%
Other	1	.4%

Note: Seventy-one of the projects were in more than one category.

HRD Research

Area of HR practice

Respondents named the area of human-resource practice related to their research projects; the list from which they chose was from McLagan's human resource wheel in *Models for Excellence* (1983), with the addition of career development.

As you can see in Figure 1, the respondents reported research in all 10 areas, but the highest number (36 percent) listed training and development. Other areas listed in at least 10 percent of the responses were organization development, career development, human-resource planning, and selection and staffing. Respondents for 64 of the projects checked only one area; the others indicated that their research concentrated on two or more areas.

Research methodology

The survey asked the respondents to name the research methodology they used (see Figure 2), based on the methodologies described by Miller and Barnett in *The How-To Handbook on Doing Research in HRD* (1986). Of the nine methodologies, the one used most often was descriptive, followed by theoretical model building. Eight percent of those surveyed listed a methodology other than the nine provided. Respondents for 87 of the projects used a single research methodology; the rest used more than one method for each project.

Funding

Respondents for nearly two-thirds of the projects said their studies were not funded (see Figure 3). Of the rest, 21 percent said their projects received financial support from academic institutions, 10 percent from government agencies, and eight percent from corporations. Those figures include two respondents who said that they received funds from a combination of those sources. Only four did not respond to the question.

Academic base

As shown in Figure 4, departments and colleges of education were responsible for most of the research, followed by business colleges. Nine of the responses came from departments using variations of the words "human resource" in their titles, but did not indicate their relationship to the traditional disciplines. Seven respondents were from departments of communication, six from departments of psychology. Dissertation research accounted for 22 percent of the projects; 16 of the projects were master's theses.

More than half of the academic programs (38) reported one research project only. One program reported 16. The breakdown for the rest is as follows:

- 11 programs, 2 projects each;
- 3 programs, 3 projects each;
- 7 programs, 4 projects each;
- 1 program, 5 projects;
- 1 program, 6 projects.

Literature reviewed

The survey instrument also tried to determine the previous research studies that the respondents had examined in preparation for their current projects. Nineteen of those surveyed

Figure 2—Methodology used in HRD research projects

	Number	Percentage
Descriptive	65	35.7%
Action	14	7.7%
Developmental	13	7.1%
Theoretical-model building	20	11.0%
Causal-comparative	10	5.5%
Quasi-experimental	7	3.8%
Correlational	15	8.2%
Historical	13	7.1%
Experimental	11	6.0%
Other	14	7.7%

Note: Respondents for 45 projects checked more than one methodology; three did not respond to the question.

Figure 3—Funding of HRD research

	Number	Percentage
Unfunded research	86	65.6%
Funded research		
Academic institutions	21	46.7%
Government agencies	10	22.2%
Corporations	8	17.7%
Undesignated	5	11.1%
Consultant	1	2.2%

Note: Four did not respond to this question.

did not respond. Nine listed the type of sources they used—dissertation abstracts, the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), journals, books, discussions, and so forth. The rest listed topics related to the subject matter of the research, such as adult learning, instructional television, career counseling, and organizational change.

Figure 4—Academic characteristics of HRD researchers

	Number	Percentage
Academic base		
Education	70	51.9%
Business	38	28.1%
Human resource	9	6.6%
Communication	7	5.2%
Psychology	6	4.4%
Other	5	3.7%
Academic rank		
Professor (full-time, 34; part-time, 1)	35	25.9%
Associate professor (full-time, 21; part-time, 1)	22	16.3%
Assistant professor	23	17.0%
Other	2	1.4%
Graduate student		
Doctoral (Dissertation research, 30; other doctoral research, 7)	37	27.4%
Masters	16	11.9%

Projected outcomes

Respondents for 30 projects omitted information about desired outcomes—that suggests that some of the projects were in the early stages of development. The others described outcomes in many different ways, from simple statements to more detailed results that listed specific findings.

Summary

The data from this survey must be interpreted with care because of the lack of clarity of what actually constitutes HRD research, the diversity of departments and people responding, and the limited return. Nevertheless, we can make the following generalizations:

- current research in HRD consists largely of unfunded projects using descriptive methodology or theoretical model building;
- the focus is on the human practice areas of training and development, organization development, and career development;
- principal researchers are professors and graduate students in the academic fields of education and business.

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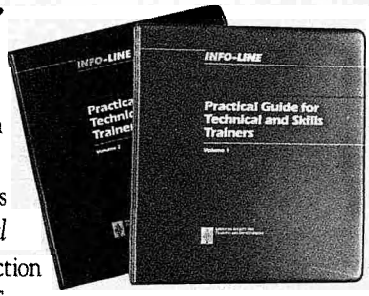

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