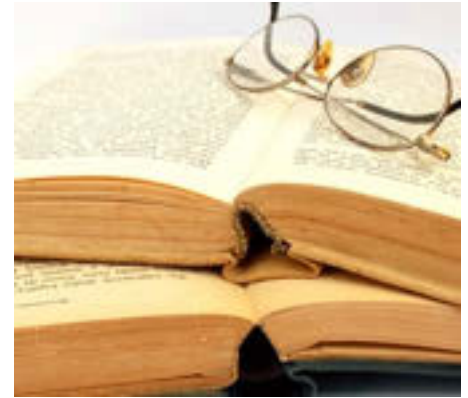

QUOTING RESEARCH THAT NEVER EXISTED

HARVARD-YALE WRITTEN GOALS STUDY: FACT OR FICTION

MIKE MORRISON



Popular Press Headlines:

3% OF HARVARD MBAs MAKE TEN TIMES AS MUCH AS THE OTHER 97% COMBINED

WHY 3% OF YALE MBAs MAKE TEN TIMES AS MUCH AS THE OTHER 97% COMBINED

For a long time I have heard of the 1953 Harvard study or the 1979 Yale study on the effects of written goals of graduates on the long-term performance of people. Many coaching, training and personal development providers quote one or the other as the reason why we should each have written life and performance goals.

The study asked one question:

“Have you set clear, written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?”

Often methods and strategies we use in business and our organizations are based on what we read. But can we trust everything we read? Is your organizational development or change process based on fact or fiction?

Many often quote the outcome of the study this way:

There was a study done at Harvard between 1979 and 1989. Graduates of

the MBA program were asked “Have you set clear written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?” The results of that question were:

- Only 3% had written goals and plans
- 13% had goals but not in writing
- 84% had no specific goals at all

Ten years later Harvard interviewed the members of that class again and found:

1. The 13% who had goals but not in writing were earning on average twice as much as the 84% of those who had no goals at all
2. The 3% who had clear, written goals were earning on average 10 times as much as the other 97% of graduates all together. The only difference between the groups is the clarity of the goals they had for themselves.

OR

In 1953 a team of researchers interviewed Yale’s graduating seniors, asking them whether they had written down the specific goals that they wanted to achieve in life.

Twenty years later the researchers tracked down the same cohort and found that the 3% of people who had specific goals all those years before had

accumulated more personal wealth than the other 97% of their classmates combined.

Now while there is evidence that people completing Harvard based MBAs do [out perform](#) others this is not linked to written goals per se.

REALLY?

I was intrigued by these often quoted findings, and in 2008 I started research onto the origins to find the original research data. Hundreds of hours and dozens of emails later the results were in—there was no such study at Harvard or Yale!

Indeed even Harvard administrators themselves say: It has been determined that no “goals study” of the Class of 1953 actually occurred. In recent years, we have received a number of requests for information on a reported study based on a survey administered to the Class of 1953 in their senior year and a follow-up study conducted ten years later. This study has been described as how one’s goals at graduation related to success and annual incomes achieved during the period.

The secretary of the Class of 1953, who had served in that capacity for many years, did not know of [the study], nor did any of the fellow class members he questioned. In addition, a number of Yale administrators were consulted and the records of various offices were examined in an effort to document the

reported study. There was no relevant record, nor did anyone recall the purported study of the Class of 1953, or any other class.

It seems that there were two early “reporters” of these studies—Mark McCormack (*What They Don’t Teach You in the Harvard Business School*) & Brian Tracy (*Goals!*) who perpetuated the myth that these studies took place. Other self development gurus who have helped to perpetuate the myth include Zig Ziglar, Tony Robbins and Tom Bay in his book, *Look Within or Do Without*.

Followers of any of these well-known coaching gurus would have no reason to doubt them or question the research cited by them. An example of a coach referring to the written goals myth and supporting it by referring to Tom Bay’s work is available [here](#).

If you run a Google or Bing search for “Yale written goals study” or “Harvard written goals study” you will find 1000s of references – none of them true!

So why is it still being perpetuated 15 years later? This can only be described as a myth or urban legend amongst life coaches, consultants and personal development/success gurus.

Any training or coaching provider that quotes this “research or study” places their own credibility in jeopardy. Referring to “findings” without any substantiated research limits how much credibility we can assign to their other products and services.



“It can be proven that most claimed research findings are false.”

~ John Ioannidis ~
Professor of Medicine, Stanford University

[Source](#)

Could the outcome of the non-existent written goals study be true even if there was no such study? In 2007, Professor Gail Matthews in the Psychology Department of Dominican University of California (not Yale or Harvard) did conduct a [written goal study](#). Her study provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of three coaching tools: accountability, commitment, and writing down one's goals.

This means that there now is a study demonstrating that writing one's goal enhances goal achievement. Although unlike the miss-quoted Yale or Harvard, her research was not a longitudinal study.

(This article was adapted from Mike Morrison's blog with his gracious permission.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Morrison has 25 years experience in HR/OD, and is an established interim manager, coach, business adviser, mentor, instructional designer and trainer. On occasions he writes, blogs, tweets and takes the odd day off.

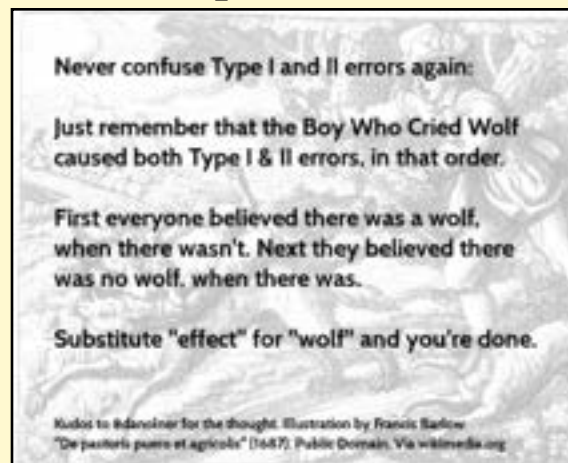
His latest book is [Organizational Development - Theory and Practice](#), He is the founder and director of [RapidBI](#), a U.K.-based company that specializes in comprehensive business improvement review for use by coaches, consultants, and business advisers.

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“Type I and Type II errors are, respectively, when you allow a statistical test to convince you of a false effect, and when you allow a statistical test to convince you to dismiss a true effect. Despite being fundamentally important concepts, they are terribly named. Who can ever remember which way around the two errors go? Well now I can, thanks to a comment from a friend I thought so useful I made it into a picture:”



~ Tom Stafford ~
[Mind Hacks](#)