

Drawing Students to Marketing: Early Interactions with Starting Students

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Abstract: This session addresses the rationale for and some methods for reaching out to prospective marketing students early in their college careers, including the sharing of experiences at the presenters' institution. The session will also serve as a forum for other MEA Conference attendees to discuss the topic and share insights and experiences.

College students today are faced with particular challenges. First, the need for a college education is as strong or stronger than ever. However, the cost of higher education has skyrocketed. Student debt continues to grow and can become burdensome for students who do not find themselves in sufficiently high paying post-college jobs. Students whose studies focus on the liberal arts, particularly if they have studied at a private institution, may find themselves particularly vulnerable to this squeeze. Training in business, including marketing, can help here, particularly for students who are not interested in science, engineering, and other technical fields.

This session considers why many undergraduate students who are drawn to the humanities and "soft" sciences might be interested in a major or minor in marketing or business and how to help them in the decision process. Students who are interested in STEM fields may also be interested in a business or marketing minor. This session also addresses strategies for reaching these students, particularly early in their college careers, and tapping into unrecognized reasons for them to study marketing. In this regard, the session suggests the idea of a student paradigm shift from a perception of marketing as profits and persuasion to marketing as a more purpose-driven and rewarding field of a study and employment, with a focus on relationship building and need satisfaction.

For undergraduate students attending a four-year institution, any significant exposure to the business school is often delayed to the sophomore or junior year. By this point, having been exposed to numerous non-business topics, students who might have become enthusiastic marketing students may well have chosen to pursue another passion, the pursuit of which may not serve them as well in their post-collegiate career. Or perhaps this other passion may well have been complemented with additional study of marketing, but the combination did not occur the students at the point at which it would have been feasible. The not-infrequent dismissal of business as an academic discipline by some faculty members in the arts and sciences can sometimes act as a stumbling block for potential marketing students, as well, since these faculty often have a first-mover advantage with the students.

The question, then, is how the business school generally, and marketing professors, in particular, can reach students earlier in their college careers and with more positive impact. The presenters here will address a number of changes that have taken place at their college to positively address this question. Also, the presenters would like to open the floor for discussion of other approaches to more successfully reaching students at or before the start of their college studies, rather than in the middle of their college careers.

The first possible touchpoint between the marketing faculty and new students is before they actually start as freshmen. Recruitment of new students is an important function of most colleges

and universities these days. At the presenters' college, prospective students often visit the college both individually and as part of several-hour-long recruitment events. Often these prospects are accompanied parents and/or other family members. While faculty are often invited to be a part of the group events, participation is often voluntary, and many faculty members choose to avoid these functions. Marketing faculty should not stay away. We all know that for many students marketing is more fun and interesting than finance or accounting and that it can lead to more concrete post-college employment prospects than management. We need to be a significant component of the face of the business school at recruiting events. Further, at recruiting events where students are pigeon-holed by their intended areas of study, we should see what we can do to mix with some of the prospects who haven't specifically identified an interest in business. Even if these students are not considering a switch, business or marketing can be a great minor for many students pursuing other fields. If an event involves "mock classes," a class taught by a marketing professor that includes a fun, interesting, short activity can help marketing come alive for prospects.

One particular pre-first-semester series of events recently added to the presenters' college's calendar are the Griffin Gear Up weekends. These spring events for admitted students are a parent-free option to allow the prospects to spend time on campus to get a feel for college life and to be more likely to hit the ground running when the year starts. This kind of activity presents an excellent opportunity for marketing faculty to start getting to know prospective students and engaging in some initial advising. Most freshmen really aren't that committed to any particular course of study as they are starting out. One of the presenters has become a Griffin Gear Up advisor and has had interaction with entering freshmen for the past two summers. Similarly, any opportunity for marketing faculty to be involved in freshman start-of-the-year orientation activities can also provide a good touchpoint with new students.

Recently at the presenters' college the liberal education program for students was significantly overhauled. One purpose of the change was to build some more exciting and engaging classes into the program. Another purpose was to streamline the liberal education requirements to allow students more opportunity to more creatively pursue their individual passions, by making it easier to complete a double major or a minor within a four-year time frame. In conjunction with the liberal education redesign, the school of business decided to also redesign its core of business classes to assure coverage of all important topics while keeping the overall core as streamlined as possible. Perhaps most significant to the business school's core redesign was the creation of a freshman-level required business class—BUSI 101—designed to acquaint students with the foundations of business and expose them to the different majors within business. While the business school has little direct role in the liberal education program, the BUSI 101 course is attractive to many freshmen because it is offered as a "Learning Community," and all freshmen are required to complete a Learning Community.

A Learning Community is a set of two courses with two professors that coordinate to some degree and in which all of the students are the same. Learning Communities have been shown to aid in retention of students, because students get to know and work with a cohort of students to a greater degree than would tend to do without a Learning Community. New students who express an interest in business are strongly encouraged to take BUSI 101 as their Learning Community during their first semester. Other students who may have some interest in business see the BUSI

101 course as an interesting way to explore whether they might be interested in business while also completing the Learning Community requirement.

BUSI 101 is, thus, a linked set of two courses, specifically BUSI 101A and BUSI 101B. It includes an important experiential learning component. BUSI 101A focuses on business communications, while BUSI 101B introduces students to the quantitative side of business. An activity shared by the two linked courses consists of students setting up a business through which they decide upon and sell actual products to the campus community. Profits from the sales go toward a non-profit selected by the students, for which students also do a service project at the end of the semester. In the course of setting up their businesses, students learn about the various functional areas of business and they interview for positions in each of the functions. This where marketing specifically comes into play. Two of the roles that students may be “hired” for within their businesses are as parts of the marketing team and the selling team. Marketing professors from outside of the class are invited to interview students for these positions, which allows students to meet marketing faculty who may not be teaching their section of the BUSI 101 course. In addition to other business-related activities, marketing activities carried out by the students in BUSI 101 include identifying a target market, choosing appropriate products, creating promotional materials, and engaging in face-to-face selling on campus.

Over the past two years, BUSI 101 has proven to be a successful way to get students engaged with the business school much earlier in their college careers. Additionally, Learning Community professors, including those who teach BUSI 101 become students’ first academic advisors and remain as such until a student chooses another direction, if that happens. What this means is that many students who previously might have gotten their first business school advisor in their junior year are now often working with a business faculty advisor starting in their freshman year. These advising relationships have consistently been shown to enhance a students’ commitment to and enthusiasm for the student’s discipline.

In conclusion, the presenters and their colleagues at their college have been making exciting strides in building interest and engagement with newer students at their college. They will be sharing more details of their approaches and experiences in the special session. They will also be engaging session participants with regard to what other ideas and approaches may have been successful at other institutions.