

ABSTRACT

HOW ARE STUDENTS RESPONDING TO LARGE CLASS INSTRUCTION IN THE INTRODUCTORY MARKETING COURSE

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INTRODUCTION

Along with the increase in the number of undergraduates majoring in marketing, there has been an increase in the number of large classes offered in the instruction of the basic marketing course. Chairs are scheduling the large classes in an effort to better deal with the resource crunch in most collegiate schools of business. Additionally, they use the "intro course" to generate large student credit hours in order to maintain smaller classes for marketing majors.

While this scheduling strategy in the college of business is fairly clear to both faculty and students, the net impact of the strategy is not as clear. For example, several critical questions can now be raised based on the experience of a number of years in which the introductory marketing course has been offered in the large class format. This paper addresses the following:

- What is the general profile of the students enrolled in large introductory marketing classes?
- What is the current level of satisfaction of students in large introductory marketing classes?
- Does this level of satisfaction differ for different levels and types of students?
- How do these students compare the quality of instruction in large classes with the quality of instruction in small

classes?

- Do student attitudes regarding large classes tend to vary on different college campuses?

Definitive answers to the above questions can be used to provide some insight into the impact of large class instruction on the educational process. To this end, scheduling strategy may not be so much a question of "should we offer large classes?" but more a question of "how can we improve large classes?" This should be a major concern for chairs who schedule large classes and for faculty involved in the delivery of large class instruction.

METHOD

Following a number of years during which the introductory marketing course was instructed in the large class format, students at two large and very comparable state universities were asked to participate in a study of student attitudes toward large classes. Students participated voluntarily and agreed to complete a questionnaire that took approximately 15 minutes of their class time. On the two university campuses, four "intro marketing" sections, three instructors, and 980 students were included in the study, with 476 students from the first university (hereafter designated campus one) and 504 students from the second university (hereafter designated campus two). The first part of the questionnaire required the participants to provide a detailed profile of themselves through conventional demographic questions related to university students. The second part of the questionnaire was used to determine the level of satisfaction experienced by students when enrolled in large classes by asking them to indicate what they would do if they could control the scheduling

process. They could respond with one of four answers: I would offer more, fewer, about the same number as presently offered, or no large classes. Another question asked the students to evaluate the quality of instruction. To this question, they could give one of three answers: it is better in large classes, better in small classes, or about the same in both.

RESULTS

From the results of the study, there is ample evidence that students are generally dissatisfied with their experiences in large classes. Given a choice, they would schedule fewer large classes and opt for more instruction in small classes. The students also believed that the quality of instruction was better in small classes. It is interesting to note, however, that over one-third of those on campus one (34.3%) and nearly one-fourth of those on campus two (22.9%) thought the quality of instruction was about the same in both large and small classes. Although students were generally negative in their attitudes about large classes, those from campus one were more accepting of the large class format than those from campus two. On the other hand, students from campus two had a higher regard for the quality of instruction in large classes than did their peers on campus one. This may be due in part to the fact that campus two students had more experience in taking large classes.

Younger students (both in age and in class standing) and those with higher grades (3.00 to 4.00 averages) were more tolerant of large classes. As might be expected, students with lower grades (under 3.00) thought that the quality of instruction was better in small classes.

The student's area of study had some influence on both their satisfaction with the large class format and on their feelings about the quality of instruction in large classes. No clear differences existed in the attitudes of business versus non-business majors in terms of their satisfaction with large classes, but non-business majors were stronger in the view that the quality of instruction was better in small classes. When compared to non-marketing majors, marketing majors on both campuses were less satisfied with large classes and with the quality of instruction in those classes.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study point to several conclusions.

First, departments offering the introductory course in the large class format must carefully monitor students' attitudes toward large classes. Second, assuming that generally negative attitudes do exist, chairs must determine if those attitudes are the result of instructor variables or course content variables. In either case, corrective actions must be taken in the form of better delivery and in the form of real changes in the course itself.

Since instructor variables appear to be the obvious student concerns with large classes, special attention should be given to selecting the most qualified individuals to teach the large classes. Because the introductory course is a broad survey of the field, it may be wise to choose senior-level persons with broad teaching backgrounds in preference to junior-level persons with more limited backgrounds. Likewise, instructors with strong interpersonal skills should be chosen over those who may be more lacking in this area.

With respect to course content variables, an interesting subject for debate is whether or not a totally different introductory marketing course is needed for the large class format. In this context, a new approach to the subject may be required in order to meet the needs of the students in course content and the needs of the faculty in course delivery. A stream of research on this penetrating question may be in order. Clearly, as noted in previous research on large sections, the introductory course is a showcase offering in many departments of marketing. Consequently, it is incumbent on those responsible for the course (faculty and administrators) to insure a high level of quality in both content and delivery.