

ASSESSMENT IN MARKETING EDUCATION: UNECESSARY EVIL OR BOUNTIFUL OPPORTUNITY?

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The area of assessment has drawn a lot of attention in recent years. This paper examines various aspects of assessment and its growing importance. It also explores the various components of high-quality assessment programs, their operating constraints, and how the new and evolving AACSB standards may affect the future of assessment in marketing. A variety of assessment issues and what they entail are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment in marketing education has been going on for years. By and large, different approaches have been used, and different aspects studied. We try to take a comprehensive look at assessment, the impact of the evolving standards of The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and how these may present an opportunity for improving marketing education.

Defining Assessment

In order to avoid misperceptions, it is critical to determine what assessment is - and what it is not. One of the most popular (and in our estimation, accurate) definitions of assessment is provided by Thomas Angelo, a well-respected leader in university assessment efforts. Angelo (1995) states that "assessment" is "an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning." The three components of this definition are worthy of attention. First, assessment is an "on going process," not a one-time test or survey. The use of the word "process" connotes to those adopting this definition a desire to create a culture designed to improve education by using data attained in a purposeful and thoughtful manner. The definition also contains the word "understanding." The author presciently recognizes that university faculty, including most marketing educators, is generally not trained in the student learning process. Thus, there is a rich opportunity through faculty participation in assessment programs for university educators to better understand the learning process. Finally, and no doubt the heart of why assessment is of interest to many of us, it provides a means to "improve" student learning.

Angelo (1995) further states that a successful assessment program should include four

commitments. Specifically, administrators and faculty proceeding with the design and implementation of an assessment initiative need to commit to: "Making our expectations explicit and public." Assessment involves creating educational goals that are specific. Of equal importance, the objectives of a marketing course or program, for example, should be shared widely with constituent audiences both within and without the university.

- "Setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality." The learning objectives established should exhibit two characteristics. Each objective should be relevant in terms of content knowledge and skill development given the overall needs of the academic program. And, it is critical for the learning objectives of individual courses and programs to be rigorous.
- "Systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards." A major thrust of any assessment program is the collection of information relating to select learning objectives. The use of the term "systematically" is very important, because successful assessment programs not only impact all areas of the learning environment, but they are also part of a strategic plan to use scarce resources wisely. Data will not be collected on all learning objectives every year; instead, a "systematic" program will recognize that relevant unit leadership will select which objectives will be the focus of assessment analysis each year.
- "Using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance." In practice, assessment provides rich information that the astute course or program administrator will employ in one of three manners. Most obviously, the educational process charged with delivering a particular result is changed. For example, if students are not meeting education objectives associated with understanding statistics related to sampling, perhaps faculty agree to provide greater coverage to the subject in a marketing research course. Note, though, that information garnered through a high-quality program could also be used to change educational objectives or alter information-gathering processes.

Note that given the definition of assessment provided by Angelo, it is difficult to make the case that simply grading individual student assignments or team projects rises to the level of assessment. The primary purpose of grading is to evaluate student or group performance – not improve the educational climate provided by the instructor.

HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT IN MARKETING EDUCATION

There have been numerous attempts at assessment of marketing programs. Yet we could not find any that related to assessment to the evolving AACSB standards. Glynn and Rajendran (1993) provided an interesting insight about perceptions of students in the principles of marketing class and how it differed from the capstone (strategy) class. Celuch and Slama (2002) focused on issues like the development of critical thinking and life-long learning. A recent study by Davis, Misra, and Van Auken (2002) examined, via a gap analysis, the skills and knowledge perceptions of alumni who had graduated five years earlier. Yet other studies have examined how effectively marketing majors meet the hiring criteria of employers (Kelley and Gaedeke 1990), or to specific courses like international marketing (Lundstrom and White 1997). There have been other studies in the area but they have mostly avoided the area of learning goals that the AACSB is increasingly emphasizing.

IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT TO MARKETING EDUCATORS

Faculty who are engaged in assessment efforts quickly discover that the promises associated with assessment are indeed true. The internal motivation of professional educators to strive to enhance their courses or the programs within which they teach is quite strong. Yet given that few Ph.D. programs provide their students with exposure to even elemental aspects of teaching young adult learners, assessment may well quench the thirst of faculty who are desirous of improving their teaching performance. Further, Mitchell and Dean (1999), citing a report issued by the Education Commission of the United States, find that one of the twelve attributes of quality in undergraduate education is assessment. Certainly all members of the academic community are interesting in offering "quality" academic programs. Without considerable external forces, however, the internal drive to improve is not sufficient for most faculty to appreciate just how important assessment can be to a member of the academy.

Assessment has received greater and greater visibility within higher education during the past decade as state legislators, employers, parents, and the general public are asking that institutions become more accountable. The growth of on-line programs, who often tout a specific set of accomplishments attained by program graduates, has also forced traditional institutions of higher education to "prove" the value of their programs. But in our estimation the single greatest factor in generating interest in assessment in university campuses across the nation has been the seriousness with which regional accrediting entities have embraced assessment.

For marketing educators, the business accrediting entity AACSB may currently be the single most critical reason why assessment is important. Extant AACSB standards for accreditation include a section on "Curriculum Planning and Evaluation." (Current AACSB Standards 2001) Specifically, section C.2.2 provides that the degree program under evaluation "should be systematically monitored to assess its effectiveness and should be revised to reflect new objectives and to incorporate improvements based on contemporary theory and practice." (Emphasis added.) In the "Guidance for Self-Evaluation Report" section following Section C of the current standards, AACSB asks programs under review to provide a description of how member schools analyze "educational outcomes." The Guidance states that "outcomes assessment activities" might include a "review of placement of graduates" and "information from stakeholders, such as employers and alumni, on graduates' performance."

While the quoted language may send a signal to AACSB member schools and those that aspire to be accredited by AACSB that assessment is significant, a review of the proposed standards for business accreditation are clear that assessment of educational outcomes will soon be a critical focal point for evaluation. The strength of the language employed in the current draft should be sufficient to convince every college of business administrator and faculty member that a program will not attain accreditation or keep accreditation without employing a rigorous program of assessment that has provided solid evidence as to the status of the degree that learning goals have been attained.

The most recent version of the proposed standard states that "assurance of learning" is one of the three major categories for establishing educational excellence (Proposed AACSB Standards 2002). The authors of the proposal are also clear that "the emphasis is on learning outcomes, rather than the structure of the curriculum." (Proposed AACSB Standards, at 5.) Detail provided within the draft

substantiates the seriousness with which the authors are embracing assessment as a cornerstone of business program accreditation in the future. The two primary components of assessment are deemed to be the creation of learning goals and the demonstration of learning achievement. As we have experienced, these are the two most important aspects of a top-tier assessment plan.

COMPONENTS OF A HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

The AACSB proposed standards create a dual stage process for establishing a high-quality assessment program. First, learning goals are established for the purposes of "setting priorities and emphasis, designing learning experiences, and fulfilling educational expectations." (Proposed AACSB Standards, at 55.) Further, the authors of the draft anticipate that learning goals at the course or single-topic level will be detailed, although the standards are geared far more to the broader learning objectives associated with individual programs. Each program should develop learning goals that indicate how faculty believe that completion of a business program will affect intellectual and behavioral competencies possess by a student. (Proposed AACSB Standards, at 56.) Marketing educators have a particular opportunity because AACSB envisions goals being established for general education and "management-specific" areas of business, including marketing.

But the "Learning Goals" heading contains materials that asks that the business school proceed far beyond merely establishing educational objectives. The section pertaining to goals also states "faculty must decide where the goals will be addressed within degree curricula." Moreover, faculty should establish "monitoring mechanisms" to ensure that the goals publicized. Finally, discipline members "must operationalize the learning goals by specifying or developing the measurements that assess learning achievement on the learning goals." This last point is emphasized when the authors conclude "making them operational through actual measurement is the definition" of the educational goals. (Proposed AACSB Standards, p. 57-58).

Learning goals, though, are not created by faculty in a vacuum. The AACSB anticipates that external constituencies will provide valuable information that the faculty can consider in determining learning goals. Recent graduates, major employers of graduates, and corporate advisory groups are specifically mentioned as parts of the business community that could provide insight to faculty as they go about creating and revising program

learning goals. (Proposed AACSB Standards, p. 58).

In section separate from learning goals, the AACSB ask that a school under review demonstrate learning achievement. This second aspect of a top-quality assessment program can be achieved through a variety of approaches. One easy method is to select students into a business degree program on the basis of having already achieved certain levels of competencies. This is often termed an "input assessment mechanism." Another means of showing achievement is through the use of a course-embedded measurement mechanism. The most popular method employed by business schools is through the use of a capstone business-strategy course. Finally, schools can use a "student outcomes mechanism." Using these devices require that students demonstrate a certain level of proficiency. The collective information garnered from this type of assessment mechanism can show faculty areas of strengths and weaknesses. (Proposed AACSB Standards, at 58-62)

Establishing the learning goals and creating methods of demonstrating achievement do not, however, suffice. As the proposed standards pointedly establish, schools under review "should show how results impact the life of the school." (Proposed AACSB Standards, p. 60).

Constraints to Establishing a Culture of Assessment

The reasons for the reticence commonly exhibited by marketing faculty and college of business administrators to embrace assessment need to be fully understood in order to assure that the potential benefits of a high-quality assessment program are attained. But the marketing educator leading the assessment effort should, of course, not only understand possible impediments. Methods of combating common hurdles to aggressive assessment initiatives also should be designed prior to facing the problems that often accompany such initiatives.

The lack of administrative support for assessment efforts can be a source of frustration and, perhaps, failure to those attempting to establish an assessment program for marketing programs. Many academic years begin with top-level administrators stating "this will be the year for assessment." Soon, however, interest in assessment may wanes as expenses and potential impact of such programs are more seriously contemplated and other pressing issues draw attention away from assessment. Because support for assessment from "the top"

diminishes, it may well leave those on the front lines attempting to create a true culture assessment – and facing more than a modicum of resistance to those efforts – demoralized. Marketing educators engaging in assessment program development should, at the beginning, secure a financial commitment (e.g., assigned time, travel funds, survey research monies) that not only supports their efforts but also communicates forcefully to all individuals within the academic unit the importance of assessment.

The role of university, college of business, and department administrators should also be considered carefully and understood fully. On the one hand, assessment programs that are purely "top-down" usually fail in the long term. In our experience, assessment can be one of the most sensitive issues faced by faculty, and imposition of assessment by "the administration" creates cries from faculty that administrators are treading on the academic freedom principles so cherished by members of the academy. On the other hand, a faculty initiated program that has limited or no administrative support will often end with little valuable rewards to show for substantial efforts and considerable emotional output. The astute observer of assessment initiatives that have occurred throughout the nation during the past decade will discover that success is generally guaranteed where the program is administratively supported and faculty driven.

Finally, there are three decisions that can provide a death knell to assessment initiatives. First, as indicated in the definition provided above, the purpose of assessment is to improve the quality of education delivered. If assessment results are used to evaluate individual faculty performance, the extent of faculty participation will be limited and can quickly turn negative. Assurances within the assessment program being proposed need to include statements providing that information gathered through such a program will not be used to make tenure, promotion, or salary decisions. Next, all faculty, not just those leading the assessment effort, should be provided with the opportunity to be trained in assessment. Even the most basic assessment presentation can create an air of excitement about working together to improve the educational climate of the marketing program. Last, faculty and administrators must see that assessment impacts positively the education provided to students. In sum, the data must be used, and the suggestions for improvement should come quickly. We have seen far too many situations where high-quality educational objectives are crafted after months of intense work, followed by Herculean efforts to attain relevant materials that gauge the degree to which those objectives are being attained,

and then nothing further happens. Those opposing assessment express glee that all the energy exuded was useless, and those leading the assessment charge are demoralized.

Implementing an assessment program is very, very difficult work. With proper forethought, however, the risk of failure can be minimized and the full value that naturally flows from a simple, broad-based assessment effort can be achieved. We have discovered that creating a culture of assessment enhances not only the education we provide to our students, but also improve the collegiality within our discipline.

CONCLUSION

Marketing education in this new millennium is faced with considerable challenges and opportunities. With the adoption and implementation of a strong program of assessment, however, marketing educators will be in the forefront of creating an educational environment of the highest quality. Angelo (1995) wrote "assessment can help to focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education." We have seen Angelo's vision come to fruition and trust that marketing educators will similarly embrace these worthwhile goals through a high-quality program of assessment. And AACSB's evolving standards are leading us in that direction

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