

THE ROLE OF CHARACTER TRAITS IN MARKETING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of the importance of character traits for business graduates in their career. A sample of 478 business students and 33 business school professors was surveyed regarding their perceptions of the importance of 42 various character traits. Students and professors strongly agreed on the importance of traits such as *responsibility, trustworthiness, honesty, and dependability* for graduates. They also agreed on the least valued traits of sensitivity and empathy. Based on these and other findings on character traits, marketing educators should recognize the importance of character traits for their graduates, as well as knowledge acquisition and career skill development.

INTRODUCTION

The mission statement of most business schools today includes the goal of helping to prepare graduates for a successful career in business. This focus primarily revolves around the appropriate *knowledge acquisition* for students and the *development of skills* important for careers in business. The issue of *character development* of the students has been largely ignored in the model of business school education. As educators we want our graduates to be knowledgeable and competent in their discipline, but we also want them to be *responsible* and *compassionate* members of business and society. This study considers the universal character traits perceived to be important for business graduates from the viewpoint of business students themselves and their business professors.

As the trend in business education, and marketing education in particular, has moved toward an experiential, interactive approach, students have had the opportunity to develop many key business skills, such as teamwork, negotiation, leadership, and communication. The marketing literature supports the notion that these interpersonal skills, as well as other skills, are critical to the success of marketing graduates (Lamb, Shipp, and Moncrief 1995; Floyd and Gordon 1998; Smart, Kelley, and

Conant 1999). Marketing education studies often focus on relevant *workplace/career skills*, such as problem-solving, communication, and even etiquette skills and *personality related traits*, such as initiative, assertiveness, and self-confidence. Yet the category of *character traits*, such as respect, integrity, fairness, and responsibility, is conspicuously missing in the literature. The John Temple Foundation College and Character Initiative is just one group showing the growth of support for character development in higher education. As responsible marketing educators, we must be aware of this trend and be knowledgeable on the significance of such efforts.

The purpose of this paper is to gather empirical data which will help develop an understanding of the significance of character traits in business education. Specifically, this paper presents:

1. A brief review of skills development in the marketing education literature.
2. A discussion of character development programs in higher education.
3. Methodology for a study of student and professor ratings of character traits perceived to be important for business graduates.
4. Results related to character traits including a comparison of professor and student ratings.
5. Conclusions and recommendations related to using the findings as a building block to enhance future business school education practices.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Numerous studies in the marketing education literature have discussed the importance of *workplace/career skills* development for business students (Kelley and Gaedeke 1990; Arora and Stoner 1992; Ronchetto and Buckles 1994; Lamb Shipp and Moncrief 1995; Scott and Frontczak 1996; Krishnan and Porter 1998; Floyd and Gordon 1998; and Eastman and Allen 1999). Gault,

Redington, and Schlager (2000) developed a paradigm which grouped skills into four categories:

1. Academic skills
 - a. Analytical skills
 - b. Computer applications
 - c. Creative thinking
 - d. Informational search
 - e. Problem solving
2. Job acquisition skills
 - a. Job interviewing
 - b. Job networking
 - c. Resume writing
3. Interpersonal skills
 - a. Leadership and teamwork
 - b. Relationship building
4. Communication skills
 - a. Oral presentation
 - b. Proposal writing
 - c. Written communication

Smart, Kelley, and Conant (1999) suggest that educators must work to strengthen the communication, decision-making, and creative thinking skills of students. In addition to the accumulation of a particular skill set, Cooper and Loe (2000) emphasize the importance of the determination of formal *processes* to enhance skill development. Finally, Eastman and Allen (1999) suggest that *skills assessment* is a "long, continuous process."

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Although business education literature offers limited discussion of character development, the education and humanities literature provides support for character education in books such as *Moral Education and the Liberal Arts* (Mitias 1992). Through writing books such as *Educating for Character* (1991) and *Raising Good Children* (1983) and his work with the Character Education Partnership (CEP), Thomas Lickona has become a predominant author discussing the reasons for character education.

The John Templeton Foundation, a well-known program on character development established in 1987, conducts research on methods of character development in undergraduate education and has set up an Honor Roll of colleges and universities which emphasizes character development as part of the educational experience. Other academic organizations which study and encourage some aspect of character development in higher education include The Center for Academic Integrity

at Duke University, the Character Education Partnership (a group of civic organizations, schools, and businesses dedicated to developing the character of young people for a more compassionate and responsible society), and Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character. At the center of all of these programs is the desire to promote responsibility, compassion, integrity, fairness, respect, and other core ethical values to students. Business school educators are quite familiar with the importance of integrating ethics and social responsibility into curriculum. The AACSB, employers, and society in general, support this trend in business education. Today 85% of all North American companies have a corporate ethics code. As marketing educators, it is imperative that we adequately prepare our students to be successful in business and society. Today, this includes assisting students in (1) knowledge acquisition, (2) skills development, and (3) character development. These three areas should provide the foundation to marketing curriculum development, yet often the third aspect is missing from the model.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study was conducted with both marketing students and marketing educators at a large, public western college. In the first stage of the study, a small sample of both educators and students were asked open-ended questions related to character traits they considered important for graduating students. Based on these preliminary findings, a list of 42 traits was determined. Since previous studies including Arora and Stoner (1992) have utilized standard self-report of perceptions of the importance of skills, this study also utilized the standard self-reporting of the importance of character traits. In the preliminary study, these 42 traits were placed in random order on a questionnaire to 19 undergraduate marketing majors. This small sample helped clarify scale, wording and clarity issues with the proposed questionnaire.

The questionnaire was then administered to 478 students and 33 professors in the same western college's business school. People who had participated in the earlier study were asked to not complete the revised questionnaire. Each respondent was asked to rate the importance of all 42 traits for graduating seniors on a 7-point Likert scale. The student questionnaires were completed by students at the beginning of a class period in randomly selected school of business courses including accounting, finance, economics,

marketing, management and computer management systems. Students from a senior level marketing research course helped to administer the student in-class survey and respond to student inquiries about the questionnaire. The professor questionnaires were distributed within each department with a request to complete the document within two weeks. A sample of 33 respondents, 57% of all full-time, tenure track business school professors, completed the survey. A limitation of this research is that students and professors in the sample were only from one university.

RESULTS

A large majority of student respondents were majors in the business school including: 12.8% marketing, 20.1% management, 25.3% computer management systems, 12.4% finance, 2.1% economics, and 11.4% accounting. Approximately 16% of the student respondents were majors from outside the school of business. The majority of students, 74%, had a class standing of junior or senior. The student gender breakdown was 53% male and 47% female. The college studied enjoys a diverse ethnic population reflected in the study with 59% Caucasians, 17% African-American, 10% Asian and 9% Hispanic respondents.

The professors responded from all departments of the school of business including: marketing 21%, accounting 25%, economics 18%, finance 18%, management 9% and computer management systems 9%. The majority of instructors, 68%, had an established, tenured position at the college. Professor respondents were 64% male and 36% female.

The sample means for the 42 character traits are listed in Table 1. Both students and professors most valued responsibility, trustworthiness, honesty and dependability as the top four character traits for graduating seniors and least valued sensitivity and empathy. The largest absolute differences in character trait ratings were in interpersonal factors.

TABLE 1

Students and Professor Mean Ratings of 42 Character Traits (7 Point Likert Scale)

Professors	Students	Professors	Students
Trait	Mean	Trait	Mean
Responsible	6.58	Responsible	6.32
Trustworthy	6.55	Trustworthy	6.29
Honesty	6.42	Dependable	6.22

Dependable	6.30	Honesty	6.21
Integrity	6.15	Motivated	6.15
Listens	6.06	Integrity	6.10
Motivated	6.03	Organized	6.08
Punctual	5.97	Efficient	6.08
Open-minded	5.88	Listens	5.99
Ethical	5.85	Intelligent	5.99
Positive	5.82	Focused	5.95
Cooperative	5.76	Cooperative	5.88
Efficient	5.70	Punctual	5.82
Helpful	5.67	Honorable	5.81
Organized	5.67	Positive	5.81
Flexible	5.64	Diligent	5.80
Takes Criticism	5.64	Respect	5.79
Fairness	5.64	Dedication	5.79
Perseverance	5.55	Ethical	5.78
Intelligent	5.52	Open-Minded	5.78
Dedication	5.52	Perseverance	5.77
Focused	5.48	Loyal	5.77
Respect	5.45	Helpful	5.70
Diligent	5.45	Self-Control	5.69
Honorable	5.39	Flexible	5.68
Self-Control	5.38	Takes Criticism	5.66
Creativity	5.30	Leadership	5.62
Sense of Humor	5.30	Creativity	5.59
Sincere	5.21	Moral	5.59
Moral	5.19	Fairness	5.58
Kindness	5.09	Dignity	5.45
Tenacity	5.09	Understanding	5.44
Understanding	5.06	Sincere	5.51
Leadership	5.06	Tenacity	5.32
Loyal	5.00	Sense of Humor	5.27
Dignity	4.88	Sociable	5.19
Caring	4.85	Kindness	5.16
Sociable	4.85	Compassion	5.12
Compassion	4.61	Courage	5.10
Empathy	5.58	Caring	5.02
Courage	4.39	Empathy	4.99
Sensitivity	4.27	Sensitivity	4.71

A Manova was conducted to analyze significant demographic variables in the student respondent data set. The age-driven statistically significant factors included older students rating leadership, $p=.002$, flexibility, $p=.009$, and motivation, $p=.032$, as more important traits. Students who currently hold full-time jobs tended to rate trustworthiness, $p=.001$, self-control, $p=.013$, and courage, $p=.014$, as less important and flexibility, $p=.044$, as more important.

Student Age and Work Experience Differences

Character Trait	Mean Square	F	Sig.
AGE (1)			
LEADER	5.932	5.086	0.002
FLEXIBLE	3.41	3.91	0.009
MOTIVATED	1.98	2.972	0.032
WORK STATUS (2)			
TRUSTWORTHY	4.301	7.005	0.001
SELF-CONTROL	4.551	4.36	0.013
COURAGE	7.364	4.343	0.014
FLEXIBLE	2.749	3.152	0.044

1. Age categories: 18-20, 21-25, 26-30, 30+
2. Work experience: full-time, part-time, not at all.

A Manova was also conducted to uncover significant differences in professor and student character trait ratings. Students rated the following as more important than their instructors rated the traits: (1) loyal $F=13.5$, $p=.000$; (2) dignity $F=6.2$, $p=.013$, (3) focused $F=5.8$, $p=.016$, (4) respect $F=5.8$, $p=.016$, (5) courage $F=4.7$, $p=.030$, (6) empathy $F=4.4$, $p=.037$ and (7) compassion $F=4.3$, $p=.039$.

Student vs. Professor Character Trait Differences

Character Trait	Mean Square	F	Sig.
LOYAL	18.112	13.516	0.000
DIGNITY	8.326	6.24	0.013
FOCUSED	5.185	5.831	0.016
RESPECT	6.187	5.791	0.016
COURAGE	9.288	4.713	0.030
EMPATHY	7.994	4.386	0.037
COMPASSION	7.585	4.267	0.039

Gender exhibited the largest group of character trait rating differences. The combined student and professor data set was analyzed for gender rating differences. Females rated all of the following character traits as more important than males. The character traits relating to work efficiency which received statistically significant different ratings: (1) organized $F=20.7$, $p=.000$, (2) diligent $F=17.9$, $p=.000$ and (3) perseverance $F=7.5$, $p=.006$. For interpersonal traits the top gender differences included (1) honesty $F=32.8$, $p=.000$, (2) integrity $F=24.2$, $p=.000$, (3) ethical $F=17.1$, $p=.000$, (4) moral $F=16.4$, $p=.000$, (5) fairness $F=15.7$, $p=.000$,

(6) kindness $F=15.6$, $p=.000$ and (7) sensitivity $F=14.1$, $p=.000$.

Gender Trait Differences

Work Efficiency Traits	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ORGANIZE	21.75	20.72	0.000
DILIGENT	17.73	17.88	0.000
PERSEVERANCE	8.82	7.52	0.006
Interpersonal Traits			
HONESTY	28.31	32.82	0.000
INTEGRITY	21.21	24.21	0.000
ETHICAL	21.16	17.15	0.000
MORAL	24.07	16.39	0.000
FAIRNESS	24.55	15.72	0.000
KINDNESS	29.55	15.57	0.000
SENSITIVITY	26.64	14.08	0.000

CONCLUSIONS

In a recent survey by the Horace Mann Educators Corporation, 34 percent of the adult respondents said the most valuable lesson they learned in school was taking *responsibility* for their actions. Interestingly, this study found that both business students and professors also rated responsibility as the most important character trait for graduating seniors. In addition, the traits of *trustworthiness*, *honesty*, and *dependability* were highly valued by both students and professors. The least valued character traits of all 42 traits studied were *sensitivity* and *empathy*. In further findings, older students rated *leadership*, *flexibility*, and *motivation* as more important. Overall, females rated the traits of *honesty*, *integrity*, *ethical*, *moral*, *fairness*, *kindness*, and *sensitivity* higher than male respondents. In conclusion, some differences between students and professors, male and female respondents, and differing age groups were found. The next step is to survey business managers to determine how they value various character traits in their employees and their peers.

Marketing educators need to discover ways to encourage and further develop these important character traits in their students and even in themselves. As educators, one should model key traits and provide opportunities for students to improve in areas such as responsibility and dependability. Experiential learning activities provide an excellent environment for students to think about these traits and hone their own abilities. For example, internships and client / team projects often provide a variety of opportunities to show

character traits such as dependability, fairness, and responsibility. As educators, the starting point is for us to recognize the critical role character traits play in a graduate's overall success.

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