

IS RESTRUCTURING OF THE CURRICULUM REALLY NECESSARY?

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ABSTRACT

Examines the question of whether the marketing curriculum should be restructured from three points of view: Other academic programs, skills desired by employers, and perceptions of students.

INTRODUCTION

A review of the marketing education literature of the 1980s reveals a growing discomfort with the marketing curriculum--as well as that of business education in general--among educators (Stanton 1988, McDaniel and Hise 1984, Bartels 1983, Done 1980). Although not all agree in their proposals for rectifying the problems they see in the current marketing curriculum, they all agree in calling for, at least, a reevaluation of what it is we teach our students. One consensus appears in most of these papers: Employers of our graduates believe we are falling in our efforts because our graduates are leaving our programs without the ability to "do" marketing.

The two poles of disagreement in solutions to this problem may be seen in the arguments of Arthur A. Done and William J. Stanton. According to Done, the way to better prepare students for their careers in marketing is to switch from an emphasis on subject matter (i.e., the functional areas of marketing, such as advertising, retailing, sales management, consumer behavior, etc.) to an emphasis on building basic management skills. Thus, marketing subject matter would be used as illustrations, for reference or problem solution in courses in specific management skills. These skills include but are not limited to internal, external and interpersonal communication, quantitative analysis, problem solving and decision making, written analysis of cases, business games and simulations, innovation and creativity, research procedures and methodology, and marketing program implementation.

Stanton, on the other hand, argues for a greater emphasis on subject matter--the functional areas in "mainstream marketing." Addressing what he also sees as a growing undercurrent of concern among employers with the inability of recent graduates of marketing programs to do anything other than strategic planning, he calls for a moving away from the current emphasis on consumer behavior, quantitative methods and strategic planning. While the bulk of his criticism is aimed at MBA and Doctoral programs, he does suggest that we require more instruction at the undergraduate level in such marketing

applications areas as retailing, industrial marketing, selling and sales management, and the like.

These differing points of view seem to reflect the old "professional school versus trade school" argument that has characterized management of business schools since 1959. For nearly 30 years, AACSB accredited schools of business administration have been influenced in their curriculum planning by the findings presented in the Gordon and Howell (1959) critical review of collegiate business education. As Stanton notes, that study concluded that our business programs placed too much emphasis on specific functional business operations (in Marketing, this meant courses in retailing, sales management, advertising, etc.) while not supplying graduates with needed skills in analysis and problem solving techniques, planning, quantitative methods, etc. As result, says Stanton, schools of business may have moved too far from "mainstream marketing."

To more closely examine this question, this study elected to consider the retailing course at one end of the spectrum (i.e., the functional approach) and general problem solving skills at the other. Then, the curriculum emphasis was examined from three points of view: Other academic programs, the desires of employers, and those of students at our school of business administration. The point of view taken was that of a small, private Liberal Arts university with a business school. However, it is believed that the questions have implications for larger colleges and universities, public and private, as well.

DESIGNING THE MARKETING CURRICULUM

What Schools of Business Are Doing

One course of action which may be followed in designing and maintaining a current and meaningful marketing curriculum is to do what most other schools do: Follow AACSB directives. This path appears to be leading the marketing curriculum away from marketing functions toward a planning/problem solving curriculum.

McDaniel and Hise (1984) studied 75 private and public postsecondary institutions across the United States which offered either a major or concentration in marketing; their purpose was to determine what marketing courses were offered and what courses were required. Their study replicated a 1973 study by Hise, thus providing longitudinal data.

These studies revealed that, while there has been a slight increase in the percentage of four-year institutions offering courses in retailing and/or retailing management and while the courses remain high in the curriculum standings, the rank of retailing courses offered relative to other marketing courses fell from a rank of three in 1973 to a rank of four in 1983. This change in rank occurred primarily due to the strong increase in schools offering consumer behavior courses in 1973 (40.7%) to 1983 (84.0%). However, it should be noted that the sample size was considerably smaller in 1983 than it was in 1973. Also, the mean number of marketing courses offered increased from 10.37 in 1973 to 11.8 in 1983. However, in terms of courses required of all marketing concentration graduates, a significant decline was seen for retailing/retailing management; in 1973, 21.5 percent of the institutions sampled required a course in retailing, while in 1983, only eight percent did so. Other courses which declined as required for the marketing major or concentration included advertising (mass communication) management, and marketing information systems. Courses which increased as requirements over the period were led by consumer behavior; others were marketing research, marketing strategy and product planning/management.

McDaniel and Hise's study clearly indicates a movement toward "increased emphasis" on the strategic marketing (planning) and problem solving (curriculum) approach.

What Employers are Looking For

A second approach is to determine what careers students tend to follow after graduation, and to provide those students with the skills most desired by their prospective employers. It appears as if this approach would pull the marketing curriculum back in the direction of functions--the ability to "do" marketing rather than simply plan marketing. Vincent and Berens' (1981) study of retail store managers' perceptions of the educational backgrounds that give recent college graduates the best potential for success emphasized the functional, implementing areas of marketing. Four-year degrees in retailing or marketing were rated highest by store and store sales managers. Inherent in this study was the point that such educational backgrounds give graduates skills needed in doing and managing sales activities.

Stanton (1988) has reported that employers of marketing graduates are dissatisfied with the skills these graduates bring with them to the job: "The general indictment is that these programs are turning out people who have been immersed in strategic planning, but are unable to do anything." This suggests that employers desire that graduates have more education (or training) in specific marketing functional activities.

A study using a convenience sample was made using local employers which reconfirmed the

conclusions of Stanton (1988). Employers are concerned with the lack of functional skills that current marketing graduates (undergraduates) bring to the workplace. A consistent concern among service and manufacturing firms is the lack of communications skills, both written and oral, in today's graduates. Other concerns cited were excessive expectations in relation to job scope and responsibility and the lack of interpersonal skills.

Schleede and Lepisto (1984) include as a fundamental component of the marketing curriculum development process the inclusion of the specific skill requirements of employers (marketplace needs) in both existing and future job opportunities for marketing graduates.

What Students Want

A survey of undergraduate and MBA students' career aspirations and perceptions of skills needed on the job was conducted at our university during the Fall, 1988 semester. Results of the study indicated that, despite the many career opportunities available in the field, our students are not interested in careers in retailing. Only four percent of the responding students named retailing as their preferred employment field after graduation. Employment in a service firm was most preferred (40.9%), followed by employment in a manufacturing firm (29.5%) (Table 1).

TABLE 1. TYPE OF PREFERRED EMPLOYER

<u>Employer Category</u>	<u>Percent Preferring</u>
Service Firm	40.9%
Manufacturer	29.5%
Government Agency	7.4%
Wholesaler	4.7%
Retailer	4.0%
Nonprofit Organization	3.4%
Military	0.7%
Other	9.4%

Unfamiliarity with retailing is apparently not a reason why the students are not interested in retailing as a career; more than half of the sample reported they had had some work experience in retailing establishments. This may be even greater, since one option response was Service Firm, many of which might also be classified as retailers (dry cleaners, for example). Types of work experience students reported are displayed in the following multiple response table (Table 2).

TABLE 2. TYPE OF STUDENTS' WORK EXPERIENCE

Experience Organization	No Responses	% of Cases
Service Firm	90	60.0%
Retail Firm	84	56.0%
Manufacturer	63	42.0%
Restaurant	61	40.7%
Nonprofit Organization	43	28.7%
Farm	25	16.7%
Government Agency	24	16.0%
Wholesaler	16	10.7%
Military	16	10.7%
Other	17	11.3%

(n of cases - 150)

Students offered a number of important insights into what skills they felt they should gain from classes in the Business School for best preparing them for entry into their careers after graduation. Some typical remarks were:

- > "The ability to do rational thinking in a business context, combining both 'soft' skills and quantitative skills."
- > "More emphasis on interpersonal relations skills."
- > "What it is really like 'out there.' We get too many facts, steps and processes thrown at us..."
- > "What one really does in business. I expect that 95% of what will be useful for me on the job will have been learned through experience, not through college education."
- > "How all this applies to my job."
- > "Courses oriented more towards the practical study of business, rather than just the theories behind it."
- > "How to get along in the business world...how to deal with people."
- > "More hands-on skills and practical issues..."
- > "I feel if I ever land a job, I will be 'clueless' as to what (will be) expected of me."
- > "A larger emphasis on the analysis of problems."
- > "Entrepreneurial skills."
- > "How to think on my feet."

Student comments seem to imply a high degree of anxiety regarding their transition from the university to corporate life. Furthermore, students seem to be requesting a portion of their business education be more applied, less academic, thus easing their anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to examine the issue of what focus the business school, and particularly the marketing curriculum, should take in the future. A number of observers have recently called for a restructuring of the curriculum. However, conflicting directions for this restructuring have been called for. The issue has been examined from three points of view: Other academic programs, employers' requirements, and the perceived needs of students in the program at our university.

The study has revealed that other schools are moving in a direction away from emphasis on functional marketing, e.g., advertising, retailing, sales and sales management, toward more emphasis on problem solving and planning courses such as consumer behavior and strategic marketing. Employers are apparently dissatisfied with the products of our schools--i.e., our graduates--and want to see in our graduates the ability to "do" business, rather than just be able to think about it. Students seem to have two desires: 1) knowing how to make the transition from college to the business world with the least amount of stress and 2), knowing what to do when they arrive on the job.

The case can be made that undergraduate schools of business need to pursue a more functional approach to marketing education.

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