

Lower-division Courses as a Recruiting Tool for Marketing and Sales Programs

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Area: Department development issues

Introduction

“There is, perhaps, no college decision that is more thought-provoking, gut-wrenching, and rest-of-your-life oriented – or disoriented – than the choice of a major.” (St. John, 2000). Declaring a college major represents a significant life decision (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2006).

Nonetheless, freshman and sophomore students are often expected to select a major before taking a class in their declared discipline. It is important to reach undecided students with information regarding majors early in their academic careers (Camey & Williams, 2004). An inability to take marketing courses until their junior year could result in a lack of patience or discovery of another area of interest. In order to engage freshman and sophomore students, marketing departments must identify the criteria that is influential to choice of major and proactively assist with this decision-making process. One potential approach is to offer courses to freshman and sophomore students. The objective of this study is to explore the impact of adding four lower-division elective courses on retention and recruitment of marketing students. This paper includes a brief literature review as well as a proposed methodology for the study.

Literature Review

The extant literature illustrates a wide array of factors that impact the decision to choose marketing as a major, as would be expected of any complex purchasing decision. One recurring theme is the importance of perceived career opportunities in the marketing field (Keillor, Bush, & Bush, 1995; Newell, Titus, & West, 1996; O'Brien & Deans, 1995; Swanson & Tokar, 1991; Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr & Smith, 1993). Even more specifically, students were more likely to pursue a marketing major when willing to pursue a career in sales (Bush, Bush, Oakley & Cicala, 2014). In a parallel field, a study on the effort to recruit Accounting students supports the idea that inviting high-performing students to learn more about career prospects in the field is an effective recruiting tool; 35% of student respondents declared an accounting major as a result of the program (Kaenzig & Keller, 2012). Faculty active in the business community and able to provide "real-world" insights and possible career opportunities also appears to be a key evaluative criteria in students' major selection (Keillor et al., 1995).

People surrounding students also impact the choice of a marketing degree. These stakeholders include student advisors (O'Brien & Deans, 1995), friends and family (West, Newell, & Titus, 2001) and professors (Camey & Williams, 2004). Some research illustrates that when marketing professors do not actively promote marketing programs to the best students, these students choose other business majors or select marketing as a minor (LaBarbera & Simonoff, 1999; Aggarwal, Vaidyanathan, & Rochford, 2007). Alternatively, the lecture style of marketing professors can be a positive influence (Pappu, 2004). The key finding in a study of Principles of Marketing outcomes shows that student evaluation of faculty is the strongest indicator of recruitment to the major. Overall, the quality of the learning context in marketing courses makes students more willing to select the major or minor (Mallin, Jones, & Cordell, 2010; Hsiao, Kuo, & Chu, 2006).

Other studies address the timing of when marketing students select a major. Marketing majors, compared to students selecting other business majors, decide later in their academic careers; students who are non-marketing majors have typically made a selection before taking any marketing courses (Newell et al., 1996). On the other hand, West et al. (2001) identified that 23% of marketing students decided their major by the junior year of high school, compared to only 10% of non-business students. These studies point to a potential role for lower-division courses in keeping high-school decision makers engaged as well as attracting other business majors who make an early decision. A few studies show that students are significantly influenced by lower division courses when making their degree selections (Camey & Williams, 2004; Keillor et al., 1995; Newell et al., 1996; Pappu, 2004) and an exposure to lower-division, introductory marketing courses in the initial phase of a business degree also influence students to opt for a marketing major (Pappu, 2004; Camey & Williams, 2004; West et al., 2001).

Conceivably, lower-division marketing courses can address several of the issues introduced here. These course may (1) introduce students to the varied job prospects in the marketing and sales discipline, (2) keep the interest of students who have already decided to major in marketing, and (3) gain the interest of students who would like to major in business but do not know in which area. Specifically, Keillor et al. (1995) identified that career opportunities in marketing appear to be a prime area of concern to lower division students who have not yet committed to a major.

Methodology

The scope of the proposed study includes four lower-division courses: (1) The Magic of Marketing, an introductory marketing course for freshmen; (2) Marketing Around the Globe, designed for non- majors to meet a University course requirement; (3) Introduction to Sales; and (4) Customer Service. The latter two courses were developed specifically to engage freshman and sophomore-level students in the sales curriculum. Students' declared majors and minors before and after the introductory courses will be explored using two methods. First, advising system data will be pulled to show students' declared majors and minors at the beginning and end of the semester in which they took the introductory course, and then one year after the course. While the analysis of declared majors and minors will show whether students change their academic plans, the change cannot necessarily be attributed to the lower-division class directly. This attribution will be the purpose of the second methodology, a brief survey of students at the end of the semester-long introductory classes. Questions will address: (1) Why did you take this class? and (2) Have your academic plans changed as a result of taking this class? How? Together, the two methods will create a picture of the effectiveness of lower-division courses as a tool for recruitment and retention.

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