

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SELF-MARKETING CLASS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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The purpose of this paper is to show how one North Western university applies marketing principles in helping all business students regardless of their area of studies to find their vocation and prepare themselves for the challenges of the job market. Specifically, we discuss a self-marketing course designed to equip students with tools, information and practice to increase self-awareness, establish long-term career goals, and develop a personal professional strategy.

Professional Development Program Overview

The purpose of the professional development program is to engage students in active learning and leadership development. Hence, each year students are required to achieve specific learning objectives by completing a set of professional development requirements. For example, freshman students complete Strengths Quest assessment (Clifton et al. 2006) and create a portfolio containing their resume, job shadow reflection, Strengths Quest results, and vocational interest assessment. In their second year, these students complete their second job shadow, learn about informational and job interviewing, and create a personal marketing plan. In their junior year, students take part in various networking events, learn about electronic marketplace for job placement, and interview for internships. Finally, in their senior year students attend a job fair, participate in mock interviews, and attend various workshops designed to help them transition from college to employment. Service is an integral part of professional development and therefore is required throughout all four years of the program.

The Self-Marketing Course Overview

The self-marketing course is part of the Professional Development Program and is required for all sophomore-level business students regardless of their major. The cornerstone of this course is a Personal Marketing Plan that teaches students how to develop a comprehensive personal marketing strategy for finding and securing a vocation. The course design includes many activities, including goal-setting, researching career opportunities, soliciting and conducting informational interviews, networking, developing a professional brand, creating a

brand statement (i.e., elevator pitch), and conducting a personal SWOT analysis. All of these activities provide input for the development and writing of the personal marketing plan.

From the start, students are required to take full responsibility for their own success. They must see themselves as 'a personal services corporation' (Tracy, 2005) competing in a crowded and increasingly global job market. Within this context, employers are viewed as customers or clients who have substantial bargaining power when it comes to selecting potential employees. Yet graduates can increase their leverage through differentiation and superior market value. The market value of an employee encompasses more than just education and includes skills, work and leadership experiences, personality, and attitude. Only when students understand their personal responsibility and can conceptually think of themselves as a brand will they benefit from developing a personal marketing plan.

Data Collection and Results

To assess the effectiveness of the self-marketing course we accessed the survey data from the School of Business Professional Development office. The data includes employers' evaluations of interns and students' evaluations of their employers. The sample consisted of 91 completed internships for which employers' and students' survey responses were available. The Career Development office reported that 100% of junior-level business students succeeded in securing an internship (a total of 116 students).

To evaluate the impact of the self-marketing course on students' internship experience we examined their responses to the survey question, "Your readiness for the work you are doing," since one would expect that all the assignments of the course would prepare students for their careers, including the internship. We also would expect that after going through the rigorous examination of one's goals and learning objectives, students would be able to better understand what they want to pursue and would be more likely to pick an internship that is in line with their learning objectives. So, we also examined the student responses to the question, "The relationship of your work to your learning objectives." The students were responding on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent).

In general, students were well prepared for the internship work, with the mean of 4.12 and standard deviation of .83. The students also saw a good connection between the work and their learning objectives, with the mean of 4.44 and standard deviation of .65.

In addition, we examined employers' evaluations of students in regard to their internship performance. The employers rated their interns on a 5-point scale similar to the student survey. In sum, the means for employers' evaluations of their interns ranged between 4.39 ("Oral & written communication, expression of ideas") and 4.70 ("Working relationship with others").

We also examined correlations between students' responses on "readiness" and "relationship between work and learning objectives" and employers' evaluations. We expected that the students' perceptions of readiness and fit would be reflected in their specific job behaviors and attitudes. The analysis revealed that the students' perceptions of "readiness" correlated with employers' perceptions of the students' "resourcefulness" ($r=.26, p<.05$) while the students' perceptions of "fit" between the work and the learning objectives correlated with the employers' perceptions of the students' "communication abilities" ($r=.25, p<.05$) and their "enthusiasm" ($r=.25, p<.05$).

We were also interested in learning which perceptions were most influential in shaping employers' overall evaluations of their interns. Hence we ran a stepwise regression that produced a 5-factor model explaining 83% of variance in the data ($R^2 = .83, p<.05$). "Quality and efficiency of completed work" had the strongest effect ($b=.28, t=3.75, p=.00$) followed by "Oral & written communication, expression of ideas" ($b=.20, t=3.47, p=.001$), "Shows enthusiasm and interest in the job" ($b=.16, t=2.77, p=.007$), "Attendance & punctuality" ($b=.15, t=2.86, p=.005$), and "Acceptance of responsibility" ($b=.13, t=2.49, p=.015$).

Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that the self-marketing course might have helped students to feel more prepared for the internship. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that this course influenced students in their search for an internship that is closely aligned with their learning objectives. The results also show that employers were very pleased with the quality of their interns. The overwhelming majority of employers rated their interns as "Very Good" and "Excellent" on all of the evaluation criteria. Additional evidence of employer satisfaction comes from the growing number of employers who wish to participate in the School of Business networking events such as speed-networking for internships and jobs that are organized for each business major. Furthermore, to-date 28 graduating seniors (24%) who completed the self-marketing and personal branding course in their sophomore year and the internship in their junior year have reported receiving job offers that they will transition into after graduation. This number is expected to grow by the end of this academic year.

Challenges and Solutions

The common challenges of this course relate to students' maturity and school-wide support for professional development. Prior to implementing a four-year professional development program, we offered a personal branding course to junior and senior level students. This gave us an opportunity to compare seniors and sophomores in terms of their receptiveness to the ideas of self-marketing and personal branding. As a result, we have discovered that seniors value professional development more and have easier time understanding personal branding concepts than sophomores. The pressure of impending graduation coupled with uncertainty force these students to think about their life after college. Thus many senior level students have expressed regret that they started learning about personal branding and self-marketing so close to graduation. In contrast, sophomores are often myopically focused on their college courses, failing to recognize the value of professional development. They often feel confused, frustrated, and even altogether indifferent toward the future.