

ASSESSMENT ISSUES IN MARKETING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Changes in business curricula, legislative, and accreditation pressures, and new educational technologies have contributed to a growing interest in educational assessment. Many students, employers, and educators believe better measures of today's learning activities are needed. To address the concern this paper provides (a) a rationale for assessment, (b) a review of assessment alternatives, (c) a process for assessment improvement, and (d) a discussion of assessment program implementation issues.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment has become one of the key challenges of the future for marketing educators. Many of the discipline's constituents have called for reform in traditional methods of outcome measurement and assessment. Students, for example, argue that testing may focus on isolated knowledge and skills at the end of a learning cycle rather than an aggregate level of expertise. Employers suggest that many forms of assessment may not be good indicators of critical thinking skills or situational performance. Instructors acknowledge that the wide variety of learning activities in today's educational environment is not adequately represented by traditional assessment methods. Finally, administrators, career counselors, regulators, and parents are beginning to demand convincing evidence of claims related to the quality of educational programs.

While educational assessment is a familiar topic at many educational levels (e.g. elementary, middle, and high school) and in many disciplines (e.g., English, mathematics, etc.) it is less developed in higher education and in marketing. Observers have acknowledged the difficulty of managing change in higher education where the graduate education process creates "traditions" that are difficult to overcome (Murray 1995). Further, the marketing discipline is characterized by several unique attributes (e.g. its multiple and competing constituents) and rapid change which make direct application of existing literature difficult. The purpose of this paper is to provide a rationale for assessment, review traditional and contemporary options for

assessment, describe possible goals of marketing education assessment alternatives, and provide a framework for implementing new or revised assessment programs.

RATIONALE FOR ASSESSMENT

Several factors have contributed to the growing interest in and importance of assessment including curriculum changes, legislative mandates and accreditation guidelines, and new educational technologies. Each of these factors is discussed below.

Curriculum Change

During the past ten years many business programs have made significant changes to courses and programs. Many of the changes reflect a shift from a "functional perspective" which focused educational efforts on majors such as marketing, management, finance, or accounting (Hill 1997) to a broader, integrated perspective. New sequences of courses, new courses which cover content from several functional areas, team-teaching formats, and emphasis on communication, teamwork and problem-solving are just a few examples of the curriculum changes many schools have implemented. The assessment procedures used prior to the curriculum changes have often been continued in the new curriculum, or supplemented with a few new assessment tools. In general, however, educators have been faced with the problem of demonstrating that curriculum changes have led to improved learning outcomes.

Legislative Mandates and Accreditation Guidelines

In recent years many programs have received legislative mandates for educational assessment. In addition, the AACSB has taken an increasingly visible role in providing guidelines for the development of assessment programs. The difficulty of such efforts, however, has been acknowledged for over a decade:

Devising reasonable, professionally responsible measures of educational outcomes is a complex process, and the complexity derives from several features of higher education. Benefits from the "products" that universities produce -

education and research – necessarily occur over the long term. On the other hand, many quantitative measurements of educational outcomes (e.g., enrollment figures, research products and performance of students on standardized tests) provide short-term measures of success. Furthermore, higher education strives to satisfy the interests of multiple constituencies – students, alumni, employers, private and public sponsors, and more general societal needs. This complication notwithstanding, goal setting and outcome assessment help business schools address serious challenges facing them. (AACSB 1989)

Some institutions have responded by beginning quality assessment efforts (Newton 1999). With the urging of legislative groups and AACSB, educational institutions must now plan for assessment improvements.

New Educational Technologies

Advances in educational technology have also increased the need for assessment reform. New media, combinations of many media options, distance learning, electronic access and interactivity, and other technological advances create many new opportunities for educators and raise a variety of important questions. Do the new technologies improve the learning experience? How can institutions demonstrate the benefits of educational technology initiatives? New forms of assessment must evolve with the advances in content and delivery facilitated by technology. As one author observed "given the rapid pace and pervasiveness of technological change, some rationale is needed to guide proposed enhancements in higher education assessment, as well as in higher education itself, to minimize haphazard and trial-and-error responses (Messick 1999)."

ASSESSMENT ALTERNATIVES

The many assessment alternatives can be described as measures of three attributes – knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics. Traditional measures have often focused on the acquisition of knowledge or information about a functional area (e.g. marketing) or a specialized topic within the area (e.g. consumer behavior). Assessment efforts have also begun to acknowledge the important of demonstrating skills such as verbal communication, computer, or interpersonal skills. Finally, while measures of some personal characteristics such as empathy, leadership, and integrity have been developed, they have not generally been adapted to demonstrate the impact of educational activities.

Assessment methods also differ in terms of dimensions such as reliability, validity, cost, and ease of administration. Methods designed to assess knowledge, for example, are likely to be more reliable than methods intended to assess skills or – performance-based activities (Palomba and Banta 1999). Similarly, the validity of assessment alternatives may vary with the many different attributes they may be intended to measure. Costs may vary from inexpensive course-related tests to expensive commercial instruments. Of course, there are also opportunity costs related to the use of faculty time. Finally, some assessment methods are more difficult to administer because they require significant interpretation efforts (e.g. case studies).

Overall there are many available methods for use. Traditional methods include written and oral tests. Other measures in use include presentations, case studies, and simulations. Various methods of collecting information such as mail and telephone surveys, personal interviews, focus groups, and panels have been used. In some cases self-ratings from the student might be used. When multiple methods are used they can be combined in a portfolio to facilitate presentation and to allow comparisons of methods that may assess the same attribute.

THE MARKETING ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The most fundamental goal in any assessment plan is to guide the process of improvement. Assessment can assist in the process of learning, determine what learning has occurred, and provide evidence regarding the success of course or program (Yorke 1998). The only way to demonstrate improvement is to conduct some type of assessment of students, courses, instructors, or programs. Several authors have described the processes that institutions have used to manage their assessment plan. For example, Bush and Sjolander (1996) describe a two-step assessment process. First, objectives are set, and then measures are developed to ascertain whether they are being met. Ahmadi, et. al. (1999) describe how this process proceeded at their institution. The authors emphasize the need to link the school's mission statement with assessment procedures.

Based on this limited literature, we propose a four-step process to improve marketing education assessment (see Figure 1). The first step in the process is to specify educational or learning objectives. Faculty and other stakeholders should be involved at this state of the process. The result is a list of objectives that most stakeholders agree are important. Step two requires identification of assessment alternatives that can be utilized. If

availability of resources reduces the likelihood of using particular assessment methods they should not be included as an option. The third step involves matching each educational objective with specific assessment methods. Table 1 provides preliminary lists of educational objectives and assessment options (adapted from Borin and Watkins 1998; Palomba and Banta 1999). The matching process may be simple or complex depending on the number of selection criteria applied to each of the assessment options. Once choices are made, implementation (step 4) can begin.

FIGURE 1

Assessment Improvement Process

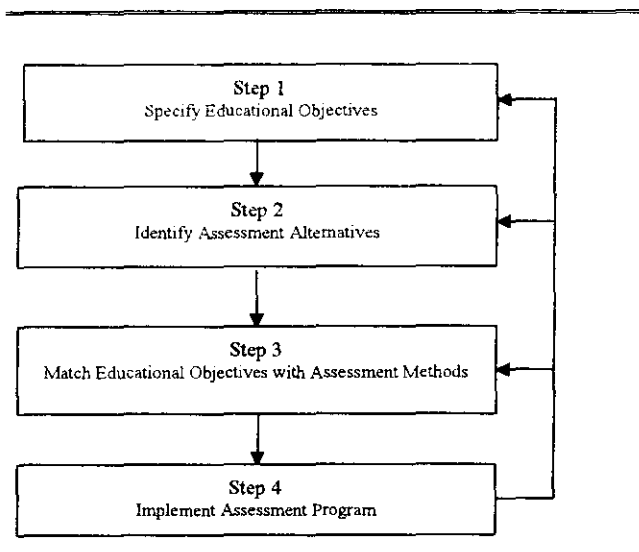


TABLE 1

Educational Objectives and Assessment Alternatives

Educational Objectives	Assessment Alternatives
Knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject area expertise • Theoretical understanding • Foreign language 	Exams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local/national • Written/oral
Skills, Abilities, Experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal communication skills • Problem solving skills • Ability to organize • Ability to work independently/ in teams • Practical work experience • Investment in community activities 	Direct Performance Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral presentations • Projects • Demonstrations • Case studies • Simulations • Portfolios • Outside panels • Licensure/professional exams
Personal Characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Ambition • Self-discipline • Leadership • Creativity 	Indirect Performance Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire (mail or telephone) • Interview • Focus groups

ASSESSMENT IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Attention to and management of several implementation issues increases the likelihood of a successful assessment program. Faculty support, a systematic process, and appropriate data collection strategies are three key issues discussed below.

Faculty Support

Wolff and Harris (1994) describe an evolutionary process that institutions may go through when setting up an assessment plan. It is similar to the notion of a product life cycle. The first stage is *denial*. Faculty resist the notion of assessment and hope that it quickly passes away. *Resistance* is the second stage. Here, the faculty vigorously dig in their heels to protect turf and avoid the process of assessment. In the *understanding* stage, the faculty develops a plan that fits the needs of their college and department. *Institutionalization* is the stage in which assessment becomes a permanent activity and is fine tuned.

To overcome the denial and resistance phases, faculty must be convinced that assessment is important, valuable, and enduring. Wehlburg (1999) suggest starting small with modest goals. Initially, a pilot study or shakedown of the process may be in order. This would help faculty in the department or college become familiar with the issues and procedures. There will likely be some glitches, allowing problems to be identified and the methods refined. During this part of the process, other stakeholder groups could be involved. Data or opinions from alumni, employers, students, and faculty from other areas of the university might be collected.

A Systematic Process

Thoughtful use of the process described in Figure 1 will allow consideration of sets of assessment methods that address specific problems. Appropriate alternative methods could include standardized tests, cases, and videos of presentations. To make the process as seamless as possible, there should be long lead times for faculty to build these assignments into the curriculum. This planning process can reduce duplicate grading. Ideally, the assessment will be done on assignments, which are already scheduled to be graded. If new forms of assessment are utilized, the issues of managing them must be addressed. If portfolios are selected, for example, how are students informed of the process? Will sampling of portfolios be done and based on what criteria? Who will grade the portfolios? Obviously, the assessment process should lead to improvement. That's the real reason for the project.

The plan should allow for the assessment of the assessment plan itself. Is it working? What recommendations for curriculum changes have been made? Are there quantitative improvements on the outcomes in question? AACSB is very insistent that something be done with assessment results to foster continuous improvement.

Appropriate Data Collection

Once an assessment method is selected there are usually a variety of questions related to data collection. For example, at what level – institution, program, course, or individual – will data be collected? Will the data be used for cross-sectional comparisons (different groups/same point in time), longitudinal comparisons (same group/different points in time), or simply as a descriptive assessment (single group/one point in time)? Who is eligible for assessment, and are they required or invited to participate? Will all eligible participants be included or will a sample be selected? If a sample is used, how is it selected and what is the necessary sample size? Finally, what is the appropriate timing of the assessment (Brown 1999)?

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the rationale for assessment in colleges of business and marketing departments. It is timely, relevant, and compelling initiative supported by a wide variety of constituents. There are many goals in assessment, but, simplistically, it reduces to whether improvement is taking place. A variety of approaches have been used in the past, and many new forms of assessment are evolving. All of them appear to have possible benefits for marketing academics. A systematic process for improving assessment program suggests that it is important to identify educational goals and assessment alternatives and them to match them by considering relevant criteria such as validity, reliability, and cost. Several implementation problems are likely to occur as the process goes forward. One particular recommendation is to start small and perhaps use a pilot study to get the process off the ground. Overall, assessment is an area with significant potential to impact the marketing discipline, and to facilitate the continuous improvement of its educational programs.

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