

THE IMPACT OF CHOICE ON MARKETING STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

The findings of Ackerman and Gross (2006) suggest that a moderate amount of choice is desirable in the design of marketing degree programs. The findings show that students want some choice of courses they can take, especially when they are interested in the topics, but too much choice is viewed negatively. This suggests that some degree of guidance is desirable to students as they complete their degree programs.

The implications of the Ackerman and Gross (2006) findings for undergraduate degree programs are quite clear. Undergraduate marketing degree programs contain general education requirements, providing the breadth which facilitates a successful marketing career. Students feel they benefit from being guided toward the most beneficial types of general education courses and do not want to be asked to make too many choices. Most marketing undergraduates may not know or care about which basic math or writing courses are best for them to take. As a result, marketing majors should be guided toward one or at most a small number of choices of these types of general education courses, with the courses clearly listed as degree requirements and offered every semester. By contrast, students seem to desire more choices among specialized courses in their major. This suggests that marketing programs should offer more choice of electives within the constraints of departmental budgets and available faculty.

The implications of these findings are less clear for MBA and other graduate degree programs. First, there may be differences between MBA students who already have an undergraduate degree in business versus those who come from other backgrounds, such as the liberal arts or natural sciences. MBA students who have already completed a business undergraduate degree may view course choice in the same way that undergraduates view a choice of electives. They are already familiar with basic course content and are able to make informed choices about courses they would like to take. It follows then that MBA programs that have a high percentage of students already holding undergraduate degrees in business may be

advised to offer a larger selection of courses tailored to the interests or needs of their students. In addition to course knowledge, these students have more diverse and more specifically defined needs which can best be satisfied by a higher degree of course choice.

On the other hand, MBA students holding undergraduate degrees in other fields, and having had little or no undergraduate coursework in business, may prefer a more structured program. Since they have not yet studied business, they do not know what they will need to know and so may appreciate a more guided program. This suggests that MBA programs attracting students preparing to change careers, as opposed to progressing on an already established business career path, might appropriately adopt programs that have a set schedule of classes with less choice, especially in the first year.

A second possible difference between MBA programs and undergraduate marketing programs is that, on the average, MBA students may be more highly motivated. Ackerman and Gross (2006) found that interest has an impact on desire for choice in courses. Perhaps motivation works the same way. This suggests that MBA students in general, regardless of their academic backgrounds, might desire more control than do undergraduate students over which courses they take in their degree programs. This might also account for the growing popularity of MBA programs tailored to the needs of specific businesses and individual work schedules.

Another area to which the Ackerman and Gross (2006) findings might be extended is to instruction within a particular course. Some courses have much structure, with the curriculum consisting of lectures, readings from textbook chapters and other instructor-selected materials, and exams testing mastery of prescribed material. Other courses have less set structure and students may choose from among alternative projects, readings, and even types of work assignments. Which of these do students like better?

At first it might seem that students would prefer courses allowing more curriculum choice. However, the findings of Ackerman and Gross (2006) suggest that it may not be that simple. Just as interest affects the desirability of course choice within a degree program, it may also affect the desirability of choice versus structure within a course. For example, student interest level and familiarity with course content may be less in required core courses, and so these courses might best be structured fairly tightly with little or no choice.

By contrast, students may prefer a looser structure and more choices among assignments in courses that are within their majors, and especially those that are electives and regarded as most interesting. Their motivation levels would on the average be

higher in these courses. Capstone courses, highly applied project-based courses, and courses that focus on sub-areas within marketing which students find particularly interesting are examples of these types of courses.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, David S., and Barbara L. Gross. 2006. How many choices are good? Measurement of the effects of course choice on perceptions of a marketing option. *Journal of Marketing Education* 28 (April): 69-81.