

THE ROLE OF MARKETING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN ENHANCING MARKETING EDUCATION: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Marketing Student Organizations (MSOs) offer an avenue for marketing students to participate in activities providing a range of benefits. There are also several problems with the functioning of MSOs that limit their usefulness and the realization of their full potential. In this preliminary study of MSOs, the authors delineate the potential of MSOs as a means of enhancing marketing education, discuss some of the problems facing MSOs, and recommend further research into MSOs.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the college experience, students seek and are provided with opportunities to participate in many extra- and co-curricular activities both on and off campus. Available opportunities can provide one or more of several possible benefits such as student governance, recreational activities, social, ethnic and religious association so forth. Additionally, the opportunity for professional growth and development is offered by discipline-based, quasi-professional student organizations. For students in the business disciplines, there are several choices: some general in nature, and others focused on specific disciplines, such as clubs aimed at Accounting, Economics, Management and Marketing majors. Academic understanding of the role, value and potential of student organizations in enhancing student development is seriously limited in general (Conyne 1983); it remains equally limited in the marketing discipline.

The objective of this paper is to increase our understanding of *marketing student organizations* (MSOs) in supplementing and enhancing marketing education. We use the term *marketing student organizations* to refer to co-curricular student organizations focused on the marketing discipline. While some of these organizations may be student chapters of the American Marketing Association (AMA), we include as well those student organizations that are independent of the AMA. We begin with a review of existing research on student organizations, and develop an assessment of the potential of MSOs in enhancing the education of

marketing majors. We consider the problems facing MSOs, and offer recommendations for enhancing the value of MSOs. Our assessment is based on inputs from MSO members, and our experience as MSO advisors over several years.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Student organizations are "formally sanctioned opportunities that allow students to associate and work together toward accomplishing common goals" (Conyne 1983). Campus directories at colleges and universities list large numbers of student organizations, with a wide variety in the nature of their activities and purpose of association. In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in student involvement in these organizations (e.g., Baxter 1992; Cooper, Healy and Simpson, 1994; Hoffman 2002; Marcy 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). While much of this research has focused on the salutary effects of student co-curricular involvement (see Gellin 2003 for a meta-analysis of studies of effects of co-curricular involvement), attention has also been brought to the possibly negative effects of student involvement, such as student stress and dysfunctional distraction from academic effort (e.g., black 1992; Floerchinger 1988; McKinnon-Slaney 1993). While a full review of the literature on student organizations is beyond the scope of this paper, we draw selectively upon the literature to explicate the benefits of student organizations and student participation therein.

What benefits do students expect from their participation in student organizations? Based on earlier work, Conyne (1983) offers a list of possible "member satisfaction factors" for student participation in student organizations. These include career development, personal growth, and social opportunities. Additionally, our preliminary interviews revealed motivations of networking with other students, access to information about the discipline, and the ability to get a better look of potential careers in the student's professional field. Table 1 offers a summarization of benefits that students hope to receive from their involvement in student organizations.

TABLE 1.
Summary of Benefits Expected from Student
Organization Involvement

Type of Benefit	Benefits Expected
Personal Growth and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoyment from activities • Expressing feelings • Establishing identity • Developing personal competencies • Developing sense of purpose • Sense of personal reward from participation
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming friendships • Social mingling opportunities within campus • Social opportunities off campus
Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing competencies in the discipline • Applying classroom learning • Entrée into professional networks

The expectations of benefits differ by student, the nature of the student organization, and individual expectations based on commitment and degree of participation in the organization.

THE POTENTIAL

Marketing Student Organizations offer a range of opportunities for enhancing marketing education. Students, faculty, the institutions, and communities could potentially benefit from well organized and fully functional MSOs at universities. However, from our interviews with faculty advisors at a few institutions, it became apparent that the full potential of MSOs is not being realized due to a variety of reasons. Here, deriving from the literature on student organizations and interviews with MSO faculty advisors and MSO officers, we briefly delineate some of the major benefits of MSOs.

Student Self-selection

Professional student organizations, while offering recreational and social benefits, primarily offer the prospects of career development and the opportunity to improve the student's competencies. In this regard, professional student organizations differ from other campus organizations that may be purely social or recreational in nature. The activities and programs are generally chosen to reflect this orientation. Membership in professional student organizations, therefore, can act as a process of selection wherein those associating with such organizations are more serious about their professional growth and development than those who choose not to associate. This process of self-selection can then

allow the institution and faculty to focus extra resources on the development of students exhibiting superior proclivities for professional growth.

Faculty-student Interaction

Students' frequent and personal interactions with faculty members have been found to contribute significantly to student learning (Lundberg and Schreiner 2004). While students are known not to take the initiative in seeking interactions and relationships with faculty members (Lundberg and Schreiner 2004) a professional student organization offers such opportunities beyond the class room. With the increasing prevalence of large sections of classes at most institutions, the opportunity for student-faculty interaction in small groups can prove to be beneficial to both faculty and students. For the motivated student, MSOs give the opportunity to get "face time" with faculty that would otherwise be difficult to achieve in most large settings classes. While a student's motivation to engage in impression management with the faculty in order to influence evaluations in their classes cannot be ruled out, other benefits could include being able to request letters of reference and receiving career and professional counseling from faculty. Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that for faculty, the additional interaction with a motivated sub-set of students can be of value in being able to understand student's needs better, and being able to relate to their abilities, outlooks, and concerns. With a greater incidence of students exhibiting disengagement from the academic process and reporting a need to feel like they matter to faculty (Merwin 2002), MSOs offer faculty the opportunity to engage students and build personal relationships. Kleine (2002) states that marketing majors in their earlier stages of their program have limited contact with potential professional role models such as marketing seniors and faculty. The limited contact possibly leads to a lack of adequate role identity as marketing majors and future marketing professionals. MSOs can provide marketing faculty the opportunity to attract students to the marketing major, create clear role identities for marketing majors (Kleine 2002), and to create a passion for marketing among marketing majors in various stages of their degree program.

Exposure to Industry

One of the benefits of professional organizations is the exposure to industry events, happenings, and trends. In a study of recruiter perceptions of marketing majors' preparation for employment, McDaniel and White (1993) found a substantial gap in marketing majors' appreciation of the realities of

employment in the corporate world. Considering that this would seriously handicap marketing majors and reflect negatively on marketing faculty, the opportunity provided for exposure to business and industry through MSO participation cannot be ignored. MSOs can serve to create exposure to business practices through the regular appearance of business professionals as guest speakers, the organization of field trips to businesses, and even opportunities for performing consulting activities for area businesses. It is important, though, that the student's exposure contain variety in terms of marketing in different sectors of the corporate world, marketing in the public and not-for profit sectors, and in the small business sector.

Service Learning Opportunities

While community-based service learning (CBSL) has been adopted as a desirable academic philosophy across wide swathes of academe, it remains little used in the business disciplines (Zlotkowski 1996). CBSL incorporates voluntary service to community organizations into the learning experience, with guided reflection on the learning experience. CBSL has been described as a form of experiential education with a base in cognitive and developmental psychology with a philosophy that stresses pragmatism and democratic involvement (Morton and Troppe 1996). While much of the discussion on CBSL has focused on its usage as a course-based pedagogy, the authors advocate using CBSL-driven projects as a vehicle for MSOs to engage in experiential learning and community service. With guidance from faculty and the training of senior members of MSOs in overseeing projects, the MSOs can become a viable platform for marketing majors to engage in voluntary community service as part of their professional education. With serious introspection about the relevance of the business disciplines (Porter and McKibbin 1998; Sheth 1999), an increasing use of CBSL through marketing student organizations would be timely and appropriate.

Professional Development and Networking

A recurring theme in the authors' discussions with students in MSOs was the benefit of professional development and networking. Students saw opportunities for professional development through participation in activities that required professional interaction and behavior. Students saw their participation in MSO activities as a precursor to what they would be expected to go through in their jobs, and the MSO as a finishing school to supplement their academic learning. Students also saw networking as a major benefit of the MSO.

Networking was identified at different levels: peer-to-peer, student-to-professional, and student-to-community. The benefits of peer-to-peer networking were identified as applying to both their current status issues as students and to their future opportunities. Students hoped to gain insights from their peers and seniors about course choices, experiences with courses and professors, and internship experiences. At MSOs with active links with the professional chapters of the AMA, the ability to meet and converse with professional marketers and to make favorable impressions with the hope of future employment were a major draw for students. With competitive job markets, the MSOs were seen as means for gaining an inside track to internships and post-college positions.

Social Interaction and Recreation

MSOs are not all guest speakers and project work – indeed, in competing with other campus groups for membership, MSOs conduct activities that are social and recreational in nature. While not the primary draw, these activities are attractive for those seeking professional benefits but not wishing to miss out on the fun and games part of associating with other college students. The combination of professional goals with social and recreational activities adds a sense of purpose and welcome diversion from academic life to MSOs.

Practicum Experience

At some universities, the MSO is used as a quasi-consulting organization run by students with the guidance of marketing faculty. Razzouk, Seitz and Rizkallah (2003) have identified the benefits, limitations and caveats of offering real-life client projects in marketing classes. One of their concerns is that such projects are not for all situations, classes, or faculty. Indeed, the problems of group dynamics and "free-ridership" have been identified as causes of student dissatisfaction with group projects. The MSO setting provides an alternative setting for providing client-projects that carry the pedagogical benefits of projects with fewer restrictions. MSO based projects are not restricted by semester deadlines and grade equity issues, and are also more likely to have a group of students more committed than those in typical classes.

Resume Enhancement

Students' participation in MSOs and their taking on officer roles are expected to reflect positively on their employability. The MSO experience can be utilized as a resume-enhancing tool for the student approaching

the job market. In addition, MSOs can require or encourage student portfolios, further adding to the recruitment value of the MSO experience.

CHALLENGES FACING MARKETING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

The potential benefits of MSOs for students, faculty and institutions are many, but so are the challenges facing MSOs. There is a wide variance in the scale, scope and success achieved by MSOs across America – from those that are merely struggling to get by from year to year, to those that have large memberships, activities and consequently, funds. From discussions with MSO officers and advisors, the authors identify several obstacles in the path of realization of the full potential of MSOs.

Competition

Competition between campus organizations seeking recruits can be intense on many college campuses. The range of organizations and the activities, programs or other appeals that they offer is diverse. The presence of better funded and more popular organizations on campus also makes the recruitment of students difficult.

Lack of Student Enthusiasm and Motivation

As with any organization, MSO membership includes students with varying degrees of enthusiasm, motivation, ability, and commitment to the organization. The lack of student participation can be exacerbated in commuter campuses where logistics of participation can be a hindrance to the functioning and growth of the MSO. While the authors do not subscribe to the stereotypical negative view of commuter students reported in some studies, it is necessary to acknowledge that factors such as less time on campus, greater incidence of full-time employment, and family and pre-existing social commitments (Schibrowsky and Peltier 1993) do affect student participation in co-curricular activities.

Academic-social Divide

There exists a divide between the academic and social components at most universities, causing academic and social activities to be seen as distinct, compartmentalized and sometimes competing parts of the college experience. While there is a movement on campuses to bridge this divide in order to provide a more holistic college experience (Jackson and Ebberts 1999), the social side of campus life is not generally supported by faculty, or may even be resented for being a distraction from academic

activities. This divide is also apparent in marketing, with MSO advising not being seen by marketing professors as a particularly rewarding activity. Further, with the exception of MSOs with large memberships, lack of funding often limits MSO activity and consequently the value proposition for members.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

MSOs represent a significant set of benefits for enhancing marketing education and the potential to use the MSO as a valuable adjunct to academic instruction has generally not been reached. Our preliminary inquiries, based on interviews reveal numerous potential benefits from and obstacles to realization of this potential. Marketing educators have not paid adequate research attention to the study of MSOs and the maximization of their potential. Considering that there is a developing stream of literature focusing on the functioning and development of student organizations, the investigation of MSOs could serve as an extension of existing work within a marketing setting. We recommend a programmatic study of MSOs from the individual (student) and organizational perspectives, with both exploratory and confirmatory research based on larger samples of the relevant constituencies of MSOs.

CONCLUSION

Marketing student organizations (MSOs) are an underutilized component of marketing education. Due to a combination of factors relating to students, marketing academicians and the academic support structure, the many potential benefits are not realized. The present paper was an initial effort at delineating the potential and problems relating to MSOs, in order to stimulate discussion and research within marketing education circles. Further investigation into the success factors for MSOs is warranted and likely to be valuable.

References available upon request.