

## MARKETING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF NON-TRADITIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATORY ASSESSMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Non-traditional business education programs continue to receive attention in the literature. However, the perception of students regarding these programs has been largely overlooked. This is particularly true in the case of marketing students. The purpose of our exploratory study was to examine these perceptions and uncover the major latent themes regarding a variety of issues related to such programs. Our findings suggest that marketing students consider non-traditional education as a viable option to traditional education. However, respondents also voiced a number of concerns such as entry and exit standards, student-teacher interaction, cost, and perceived long-term value.

### INTRODUCTION

The success of non-traditional business education, including marketing, has befuddled even the proponents of this relatively new method of instruction and knowledge delivery. While this novel educational paradigm is not currently competing with traditional institutions, it may pose a formidable threat in the future for student dollars especially in major urban areas. Non-traditional education's target market includes older, employed individuals who seek to enhance their careers by getting an additional degree without major interruptions in their lifestyles at times and places most convenient to them. To satisfy the needs of their student customers, non-traditional institutions rely on the latest communication technology such as teleconferencing and Internet-based applications. One particular form of non-traditional education is long-distance learning whereby students and teachers rely on telecommunication technology as well as more traditional forms of communication such as mail to exchange educational materials. Whether long-distance or just around the corner, non-traditional education is viewed by many as a fair alternative to traditional college or university learning. It is argued that non-traditional education offers students "real world" education by often employing instructors from industry. In fact, some non-traditional institutions choose to emphasize this in their TV or radio advertising: "Our instructors teach at night what they do during the day." Certainly, whether the quality of such education is comparable to what a traditional institution of higher learning would offer is an entirely different topic for discussion.

Part of the marketing opportunity for non-traditional business education programs comes from the perception that traditional business programs (including marketing) stress "irrelevant"

issues (such as theory and concepts) not directly related to "getting a job." In marketing, this situation could be worsened by the continued influx of psychologists and other behavioral scientists, bringing with them abstract theoretical concepts that confuse and bewilder students who are looking for a "ticket for a job." In addition, the increased emphasis on cognitive models may continue to drive a wedge between (traditional) academia and the practitioner sector that will create market opportunity for non-traditional (and more "job-related") programs: "Behaviorists are affecting the development of new ideas in Marketing. . . The continued behavioral and cognitive approach, now manifested in relationship marketing, may become a great success within academia, but few outside share that enthusiasm" (Morris 1996, p. 4).

A big perceived advantage for non-traditional programs is more emphasis on technology and what Rubel (1996) calls "technocompetency." Many traditional business programs may be doing an ineffective job of training students in this area, partially because the professors themselves may lack the necessary skill level, or they are not provided adequate support. The result may be a leverage tool for non-traditional programs. "Students have to think much more with more sophistication about the way they are going to promote products and the places to sell products. . . Students can't be afraid of that, or they can't go into marketing as a career" (Martha Gershun 1996, as quoted in Rubel 1996, p. 18).

Kelley (1996) cites a number of criticisms of traditional marketing education: "There exists a real question of whether marketing curricula have remained current with the fast pace of business change. In a world of business accustomed to a quick response to a changing environment, the time it takes to change an academic curriculum may equate to the passage of geologic time" (p. 49). Also, traditional marketing programs may lack *versatility*, where non-traditional programs have made this a feature of what they offer. "Among major trends in academia are "the continual development of technology to facilitate classroom instruction and distance learning" (p. 50), an area where non-traditional programs are already seen to have an advantage. Kelley (1996) also notes that traditional programs are hampered by declining educational budgets (meaning fewer future hires and possible elimination of tenure) and major curricula changes (pp. 50-51). Pharr and Morris (1996) also note that AACSB's "50-50 Rule" is leading to reductions in business course load requirements, to accommodate an increase of outside course work, as traditional programs try again to become more

"relevant" in a way that may distinguish them from non-traditional programs. Cunningham (1995) suggests that business schools need to adapt other curriculum models (e.g., medical school) to train students in more of a "laboratory setting." Non-traditional programs are seen as offering this, traditional programs aren't.

The purpose of this paper is to assess marketing student perceptions of non-traditional business programs with particular emphasis on graduate education. While the topic of non-traditional business education has received considerable attention from the perspective of both the practitioner and academic literature, the viewpoint of the *student* involved has been largely overlooked in favor of a more administrative and pedagogical focus. The paper begins with a description of the methodology, including the demographic profile of our sample and the research questions of interest. Following this section, we report our findings and offer suggestions for further inquiry in this area.

### METHODOLOGY

Based on a review of the current literature addressing various non-traditional approaches to education in general and business education in particular, a survey instrument was developed (e.g., Sparks and Farr 1995; Kearsley 1995; Landstrom 1995). The questionnaire contained five open-ended questions designed to elicit student perceptions of non-traditional business colleges. Questions ranged from students' understanding of the concept of these different approaches and what they thought was necessary to succeed in a non-traditional educational environment to what they considered to be the advantages and disadvantages of these colleges (*vis à vis* the traditional business college format). Additionally, students were asked to respond to questions which dealt with what they thought traditional business schools need to do in order to compete more successfully with their non-traditional counterparts and whether or not these non-traditional options represent the "wave of the future" in business education. A number of demographic questions were also included.

#### Sample

Our convenience sample consisted of 62 undergraduate marketing students at a major southwestern university. The majority (72.6 percent) of the students plan to pursue a graduate degree in business either at their present college or at another university. Nearly 90 percent of the respondents were full-time students and about 65 percent were working either full or part-time while attending classes. Slightly more than half of the respondents were female, and the sample tended to range in age from 20 to 29 years. In terms of academic achievement, the sample represented a broad range of students, about half of whom were in the "C to C+" range, with about 20 percent below this range, and about 30 percent with "B" or higher. The majority of students were in their senior year of studies at the university which makes their responses quite relevant in the context of this

study, since they already or would soon belong in the market targeted by most non-traditional schools.

#### Research Questions

The objective of our exploratory study was to gain a preliminary understanding of student thoughts and feelings regarding non-traditional business college options. To elicit these perceptions, the following open-ended questions were developed in attempt to capture the potential domain of student opinions and beliefs about non-traditional versus traditional educational formats:

1. Do you think the requirements to attend a non-traditional business program differ from the requirements to attend a traditional business program?
2. What do you feel are the advantages offered by non-traditional programs not offered by traditional programs?
3. What do you feel are the disadvantages of non-traditional programs compared to traditional programs?
4. What features do you think traditional business programs (such as the one at the present institution) must offer in order to successfully compete with non-traditional programs?
5. Do you feel that non-traditional business programs are the "wave of the future" in education (why or why not)?

### FINDINGS

#### Requirements of Non-Traditional Business Programs

A large category of responses indicated that money seemed to be the most important determinant for entry into non-traditional business programs, given their generally perceived higher rates of tuition and registration costs. These respondents alluded to the importance of students' relative "buying power" as an indicator of their ability to enter these programs. Despite the importance of money, however, entry requirements were often viewed as less strict for non-traditional programs, respondents noting "generally fewer restrictions," and "fewer barriers to entry, (importantly), *aside* from money."

In another large category of responses, entry requirements were viewed as being more dependent on differences among the students as individuals; e.g., "more tailored to student needs," "more flexible for students," and that non-traditional programs offered more opportunities to "...work around work schedules." A nearly equal-sized group indicated that less emphasis was placed on grades as a determinant for non-traditional programs. Explanations for this varied, but generally the respondents noted that money, work experience, career standing, "seriousness" of the student, and the ability of the student to demonstrate competence "up-front" (i.e., demonstrating abilities in some more direct manner than test scores or GPA requirements) were considered as more reliable indicators of success (and therefore entry) than grade point average.

## Advantages of Non-Traditional Business Programs

Respondents indicated that the largest single advantage that non-traditional programs had over their traditional counterparts was a greater flexibility in terms of course scheduling and class presentation (consistent with the "less strict/less structured" characteristic noted earlier). More than 27 percent of responses noted that this flexibility offered more options for applying and exploiting educational opportunities; e.g., "you can get the education wherever you want (for example, home, office, etc.)." Another large response group (13 percent) noted that non-traditional programs allow for more conservation of student time, in that less time was likely to be "wasted" in traveling to and from the educational site, registering for classes, being absorbed in other "administrative minutiae," and generally becoming absorbed in "non-learning activities." Respondents here noted that students often experience "time poverty," and appreciate a learning environment that is more focused on non-"time consuming" activities.

In another category (11 percent), respondents indicated that non-traditional programs offered more "independence" in the learning environment. This independence was illustrated by "more (student) choice" in class scheduling options and in how classes are structured, the ability of students to "learn at their own pace," and that "one can go to a classroom setting or access lectures externally." The non-traditional environment also is more likely to feature "high-tech" teaching tools, including a menu of telecommunication options, such as "better graphics," and "more computer 'hands-on'" applications for both faculty and students (for example, some respondents noted that "all faculty are likely to have laptop computers with them," "they are more likely to be supported by a computer networking and telecommunication infrastructure," and that "students can take advantage of greater computer literacy").

## Disadvantages of Non-Traditional Business Programs

Respondents did not see non-traditional programs as being without certain disadvantages when compared to more traditional approaches; in fact more responses alluded to disadvantages than to advantages (183 versus 158). The largest single disadvantage (39 of 183 responses) was the perceived cost of a non-traditional business education. "Expense" as an important category was thus consistent with the "importance of money" as a requirement for admission into these programs. "Impersonalized learning environment" was noted as a significant disadvantage (38 of 183 responses, 21 percent). This "impersonality" was illustrated in various ways: "students don't get as much attention," "(you) don't get to interact with professors like we do here," or "you're not able to develop friendship relationships or to interact with peers."

Nearly as large a group (18 percent) decried the "lack of external validity" of business degrees from non-traditional programs.

Comments ranged from "I can't compete with a degree from (a non-traditional school)," "many companies might not accept (such) a degree," "what would an employer think?," to "I want a *real* diploma," "it's cheap and fast-track," "you just buy a degree," "it's like mail order," and even "(it's) education by clipping coupons." Another large group (13 percent) was troubled by the absence of exit requirements. Respondents noted that "you're not 'forced' to study because exams are not administered," and "knowledge is valued less if there are no requirements or real assignments."

## What Must Today's Traditional Programs Do To Compete?

Despite concerns and criticisms concerning non-traditional programs, respondents generally believed that such programs are gaining greater prominence in the educational market, increasingly seizing market share from traditional programs. In line with this, respondents were asked to indicate what *they* thought traditional schools, still representing the majority of business educational institutions, could do to counter this competitive threat and make themselves a more viable option for prospective students. Most important, according to 15 percent of the respondents, is to place more emphasis on the use of technology in the classroom — since this is an area where non-traditional programs are generally perceived to have an advantage.

In another large category of response (14 percent), respondents emphasized the "leveraging" of traditional college faculty vis à vis non-traditional faculty. Traditional schools should exploit the perception that "(they) generally have better faculty," "students know that the faculty here...are *real* professors," and that "teachers make all the difference." One respondent noted that non-traditional faculty are "less qualified...less likely to be terminally-degreed." Nearly as large a group (12 percent) believed it was important to emphasize the "value" ("benefit versus cost") of a traditional business education. For example, "(at a traditional school) you get more for what you pay," "better academics leads to better jobs with better companies," "(traditional schools) have credentials that are more than enough," and "...are available to people who have less money." By contrast, "non-traditional programs are just too expensive," and "...are just a *game for the rich*."

## Are Non-Traditional Programs the "Wave of the Future?"

Respondents were divided in their perception of non-traditional programs as the "wave of the future" in business education. Those that believed that non-traditional programs represent the "new wave" pointed to the promotion and exploitation of "new educational values." Such comments included: "today's generation of children want things fast and easy;" "they really don't want to work as hard, so a non-traditional program looks more appealing;" "younger students don't read anymore...it's just like *Sesame Street*," it's an "easier way to get a degree," "people are

becoming lazy and try to get things the easy way," and "people want more education by sound-bite." Another large group (24 percent) thought that non-traditional programs addressed "specialized market needs" generally avoided or overlooked by traditional business schools. For example, "they reach a market that needs special attention," "non-traditional programs are expected to fill in the void," "I don't think this is just a fad," and "for traditional schools, this is a *wake-up call*."

A larger number of responses, however, seemed to indicate that non-traditional programs did *not necessarily* represent the future of business education. Consistent with earlier discussions of credibility and value issues with non-traditional programs, many respondents noted a "difference in (academic) preparation" between graduates of non-traditional versus traditional programs. In support of this view, comments included, "companies will continue to prefer people from traditional programs," "the level of preparation will never be the same . . . companies will know the difference, "this doesn't change the fact that most employers will prefer a traditional degree," "older generations will continue to want their children to make something of themselves . . . not get a *phony degree*," and "if it's so easy, what can it be worth in the long run?"

Another significant reason why non-traditional programs were not heralded as the harbinger of future business education by a number of respondents was a perceived lack of personal student-teacher interaction. These respondents believe that this lack of attention is already a problem for many traditional programs and is only worsened by non-traditional programs, whose priorities seem to be focused elsewhere. Among the views voiced were that "the demand in education will be for smaller, not larger and more remote classes," "people will get sick of video and classes on the Internet..they will want to come back to more involvement with professors in smaller classes," and "we always complain about not enough personal interaction. . . the non-traditional approach will just continue to make that worse." A related category of responses addressed a continued student preference for traditional business education, despite the trends toward technological innovation and ease of educational access offered by non-traditional programs. These respondents noted that "the intelligent person will see that (traditional programs) are more advantageous," "(traditional) learning won't go out of style," and "employers will always know the difference."

Some respondents indicated that they really "didn't know" whether non-traditional programs represented the future of business education or not. Their comments were "honestly I don't know. . . it seems that there will continue to be a need for something different, but people will always know the difference," "I can't say . . . what's non-traditional today may become traditional tomorrow," "(non-traditional programs) will always have a place, but I don't think it will cannibalize traditional education," and "it's a difficult question to answer because technology is always changing and innovating . . . people expect innovation."

## CONCLUSION

Non-traditional business education in marketing is becoming a viable alternative for today's students. Our exploratory study investigated marketing student perceptions regarding programs generally viewed as non-traditional. The findings provide insights into the nature of these perceptions. Salient categories of themes emerged suggesting that marketing students have mixed views regarding these programs. Further research can build upon our preliminary findings to examine the future direction of marketing education in the context of non-traditional methods of educational delivery.

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