

STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH COHORT GROUPS: EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Can cohort groups be effectively developed at large universities? What are students' expectations for cohort groups and how is their satisfaction with the experience affected by comparing those expectations to their post perceptions? This paper examines these questions and suggests that cohorts can be administered. Students in a pilot program were satisfied with their experiences but desire curriculum integration.

INTRODUCTION

Educators and practitioners alike generally agree that business students who appreciate the connections between disciplines in the field are likely to be better trained and stronger employees after graduation. Marketing students whose marketing education has been integrated with the basics of finance, operations, and organizational behavior are not only better general business people but are also better marketing specialists. While most business schools (and all AACSB accredited institutions) require courses in the basic foundations of business, not all schools put equal efforts into developing a curriculum that thoroughly integrates this foundation knowledge.

One of the strategies that has been used to provide an integrated curriculum for business students is to provide a cohort experience. In some instances a group of students is enrolled in a single course that provides coverage of multiple subjects, typically taught in an interdisciplinary manner. While this approach provides strong integration of the topic areas, it can be difficult to administer in systems with strong departmental structures. A second approach to providing a cohort experience that is more easily administered is a group of students who take multiple, independent courses together. This allows for common or threaded material across the classes but still allows for individual course administration and assessment.

What are students' expectations regarding curriculum integration when the latter cohort approach is used and what is their level of satisfaction with the approach? The purpose of this paper is twofold: to describe the implementation of

such an approach at a large, public university and to compare participating students' recalled expectations to their perceptions following implementation. As satisfaction is generally believed to result when perceptions exceed expectations comparing the two should provide some information about how expectations affect satisfaction in the classroom.

THE COHORT EXPERIENCE

Large, public institutions with diverse student bodies are likely to find curriculum integration through the provision of a single, multidisciplinary course a very challenging task. While demand for sections at all times of the day and evening, part-time versus full-time students, and non-business majors requiring only one or two of the business foundation courses can be challenges to the approach at all institutions, the challenge is magnified when the numbers are greater. Despite this, however, faculty often feel that providing integrated curriculum is valuable. A vote of business faculty at a large public institution in Southern California found that a majority rated the following initiative as "highly desirable":

Enhance students' ability to contribute to their employers' success by modifying the undergraduate curriculum to increase students' understanding of how the functional disciplines are integrated in the operations of business firms.

Based on this strong positive interest on the part of the faculty, the Director of Business Undergraduate Programs at the university decided to attempt a move toward integrated curriculum.

As a first step, it was decided that the administrative issues associated with enrolling a group (cohort) of students into multiple courses together would be tackled. If these issues could be adequately addressed and implemented then the second step would be an attempt to actually integrate curriculum issues across the multiple courses.

The decision to focus exclusively on the development of a cohort experience without working to build an integrated curriculum in the first attempt at the effort was further justified by the literature which has found that the simple act of participating

in a cohort group has positive benefits. Research has shown that cohort groups are effective in fostering a sense of belonging, in creating an environment where mutual respect and willingness to take risk increase, and where development of shared understanding is strong (Imel, 2002; Chairs, et. al, 2002; Lawrence, 1997; Maher, 2001; Norris and Barnett, 1994). Further, several studies have found direct links between cohort groups and learning. Reynolds and Hebert (1998) and Reynolds and Sitharaman (2000) both compared learning in cohort and non-cohort environments and found significant learning gains in the affective domain related to attitudes, self-concepts, and values. Brooks (1998) and Chairs et al. (2002) both found that cohort members not only liked being part of a collaborative group but also found it to be an enriching learning experience.

Fifty five first semester upper division business students were admitted to the cohort on a first come, first served basis. The students agreed to take four required foundation courses (Operations, Finance, Management, and Marketing) in a single semester. Students understood that should they find it necessary to drop one of the classes that they would be required to drop all of the classes. Guaranteed registration in all four courses at desirable times (Monday – Thursday mornings) was a potential incentive for students to participate. Students were not told that the material across the four courses would be integrated however they did understand when volunteering for the cohort that they would be with the same group of students across all four classes.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION – THE EXPECTANCY/DISCONFIRMATION PARADIGM

The expectancy/disconfirmation paradigm provides grounding for an understanding of satisfaction. The paradigm encompasses four constructs: expectations, performance, disconfirmation, and satisfaction. Disconfirmation arises from discrepancies between prior expectations and actual performance (perceived reality). There are three possible outcomes: zero disconfirmation results when actual performance is as expected, positive disconfirmation occurs when actual performance is superior to expectations, and negative disconfirmation occurs when actual performance is below expectations. Positive disconfirmation produces satisfaction while negative disconfirmation produces dissatisfaction. The paradigm has been studied and tested by many researchers and serves as the basis for the vast majority of satisfaction studies that have been

completed in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Yi, 1990; Bitner and Hubbert, 1994, Rust and Oliver, 1994).

Satisfaction has been defined as the perception of pleasurable fulfillment of a service (Oliver, 1999). Operationally, the construct is similar to an attitude as it can be assessed as the sum of the satisfactions with various attributes of a product or service (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). While attitude, however, is a pre-decision construct, satisfaction is a post-decision experience construct. Bitner and Hubbert (1994) point out that satisfaction can be considered at two levels: the individual transaction or encounter level and the overall satisfaction with a product or service.

METHODOLOGY

The 55 students who participated in the cohort group described previously were asked to complete a survey regarding the experience at the end of the semester during which the classes were completed. Forty-eight usable surveys were collected (87% response). The survey, administered during class time, asked students questions about their reasons for volunteering for the cohort in addition to asking them to respond to scaled response statements regarding their expectations and perceptions regarding a variety of issues including their learning, the social benefits of being part of a cohort group, and their enjoyment and overall satisfaction with the experience. Simple demographic data (e.g., major, number of hours worked weekly, age, sex) was also collected.

**Exhibit 1
Expectations and Perceptions of Performance**

Before the semester began, I expected:	Mean *
To get to know the other students in my core classes better than I would normally expect to know my classmates.	5.0
To feel a greater sense of camaraderie in my core classes than I normally expect to feel in my classes.	4.79
To gain a greater understanding of how material in the core courses relates than I would have if I had taken the courses independently.	4.63
To feel more connected to my instructors than I normally do in classes.	4.40
To enjoy my classes more than I normally enjoy my classes.	4.27
Now that the semester is over, I believe:	
I got to know the other students in my core	5.27

classes better than I normally would expect to know my classmates.	
I feel a greater sense of camaraderie in my core classes than I normally expect to feel in my classes.	5.02
I gained a greater understanding of how material in the core courses relates than I would have if I had taken the courses independently.	4.83
I feel more connected to my instructors than I normally do in classes.	4.04
I enjoyed my classes more than I normally enjoy my classes.	4.15

*7 Point Scale: 1=Not At all, 4=Moderately, 7=Extremely

Respondents were nearly evenly divided between male and female (52%/48%). Division of majors accurately represented the division of majors across the College of Business and hours of work accurately represented average hours worked by full-time students in the College of Business. Average age of respondents was 21 years. In addition to responding to the survey questions, respondents were encouraged to provide open-ended comments on the cohort experience. Exhibit 1 contains the five expectation/perception statements used in the survey and their scores.

Respondents were asked about their overall satisfaction in three ways:

- To what extent did the Core Course Cohort Program fulfill your overall expectations?
- How satisfied are you with your overall experience in the Core Course Cohort Program?
- How inclined are you to recommend the Core Course Cohort Program to a close friend?

Results of overall satisfaction are presented in Exhibits 2 and 3.

Exhibit 2

To What Extent did the Core Course Cohort Program Fulfill Your Overall Expectations?

Far Below	2.1%	
Moderately Below	4.2%	
Slightly Below	12.5%	
Below Expectations		18.8%
Met Expectations		37.5%
Slightly Above	16.7%	
Moderately Above	20.8%	
Far Above	6.3%	
Above Expectations		43.8%

Exhibit 3

Overall Satisfaction

How satisfied are you with your overall	5.0*
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How inclined are you to recommend the Core Course Cohort Program to a close friend?	5.5*
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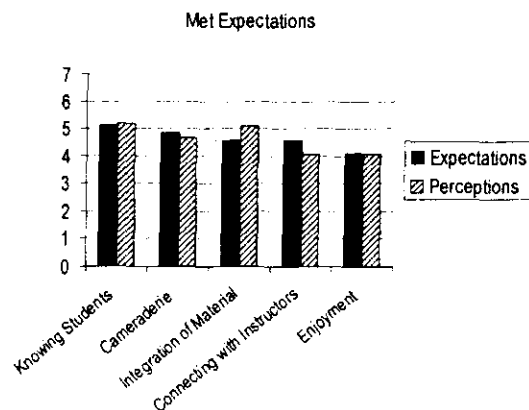
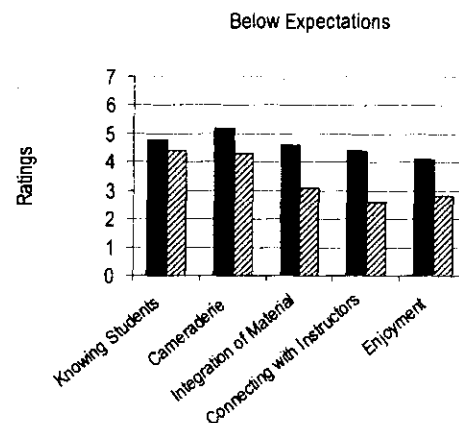
*7 Point Scale: 1=Not At all, 4=Moderately, 7=Extremely

RESULTS

Students were divided into three groups based on their overall satisfaction ratings: (1) those who perceived that the cohort experience fell below their expectations, (2) those who perceived that the cohort experience met their expectations, and (3) those who perceived that the cohort experience exceeded their expectations. Paired samples t-tests were used to compare the respondents' recalled expectations to their perceptions following the cohort experience for each of the five measures. The ratings broken down by these three groups of students are shown in Exhibit 4 and the comparisons of results are shown in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 4

Expectations vs. Perceptions for the 3 Groups



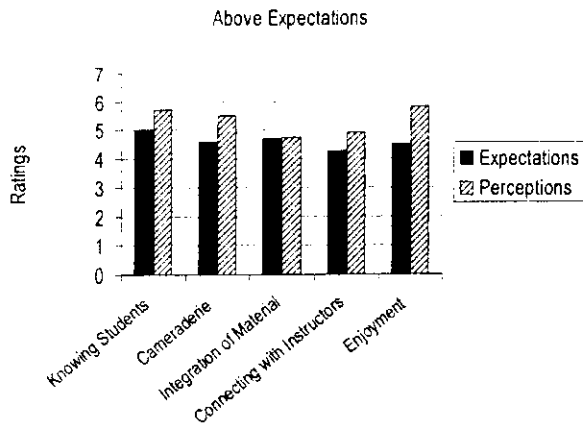


Exhibit 5

Expectation Ratings	Below	Met	Above
Comparison between pre-post assessment	t statistic	t statistic	t statistic
Getting to know the other students in my core classes better than I would normally expect to know my classmates.	0.62	0.18	3.74***
Feeling a greater sense of camaraderie in my core classes than I normally expect to feel in my classes.	1.52	0.48	1.70
Gaining a greater understanding of how material in the core courses relates than I would have if I had taken the courses independently.	2.72**	1.77	3.23**
Feeling more connected to my instructors than I normally do in classes.	2.84**	1.58	0.91
Enjoying my classes more than I normally enjoy my classes.	2.00	0.17	2.97**

**significant at the $p < .01$ level

***significant at the $p < .001$ level

Pre/Post Comparisons for the 3 Groups

The two areas in which the cohort experience fell significantly below expectations for the overall below expectations group were understanding of how the material in the courses related and connectedness to instructors. Students for whom the experience fell above expectations, on the other hand, understood how the material in the courses related better, got to know other students better, and enjoyed the course more than they expected.

Furthermore, consistent with the expectancy/disconfirmation paradigm, students for whom the course exceeded expectations had significantly higher overall satisfaction ($M=5.68$, $t=4.79$, $p < .001$) than those for whom the course fell

below expectations ($M=3.5$), and they were more likely to recommend the cohort experience to a friend ($M=6.25$, $t=2.63$, $p < .05$) than those for whom the course fell below expectations ($M=4.2$).

DISCUSSION

The most interesting difference in expectations and post-experience perceptions occurs in students' ratings of understanding the way that the material relates among the different core courses. During this particular administration of the cohort experience no overt attempt was made to integrate the curriculum, yet some students perceived it as being more integrated than they expected. Furthermore these were the same students who felt that they established better relationships with their peers and enjoyed the course more than they had expected at the outset. It may be that these students formed study groups that spanned the different courses. Such collaborations could have improved students' understanding of how the material relates by prompting discussions among students that ranged across the subject matter from different courses. Hence it may be that these students did experience an integrated curriculum albeit through their own efforts rather than through the efforts of faculty to provide it.

It is also interesting to note that students for whom the experience did not meet their expectations with regard to the integration of course material also found the connection to their instructors to be less than expected. These students may have been relying on their instructors to provide the integration of material rather than on their peers and thus experienced less integrated understanding than they had hoped and were less satisfied with the cohort experience overall.

CONCLUSIONS

This trial of a cohort program was successful on two levels: 1) the cohort experience met or exceeded expectations for a majority of the students who participated. And 2) the university, through the administration of the program, determined that it was possible to offer and implement a cohort program. An analysis of data collected from the students suggests that those who made more connections with their peers than they had expected were the most satisfied, while those who expected more connections with instructors than they made were less satisfied with the experience and found the material to be less integrated than they expected.

These data suggest two improvements of the cohort program in the future. First, students should be encouraged to work in the same groups for all of the courses so that they will have an opportunity to spontaneously integrate the material. This move could be expected to contribute to even greater satisfaction for students who already gain some sense of integration from peer interactions alone. Second, the faculty should work to develop an integrated curriculum across the four courses, perhaps including projects that draw on material from more than one course. For students who look primarily to faculty to provide integration, such a move should be expected to provide increased satisfaction. Furthermore, the increased integration of the material should allow all students to learn and apply course concepts, thus enabling them to contribute to their employers' success by increasing their understanding of how the functional disciplines are integrated in the operations of business firms.

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