

## INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

IN

## RETAIL EDUCATION

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The effective integration of theory and practice is a goal for much of business education. This is particularly true as regards the area of retailing. Several recent studies and articles have been directed toward determining just how far apart classroom retailing and "on the job" retailing may be (e.g., Coe 1978; Marcus 1978), with the evidence indicating that the distance involved is greater than should be the case. It appears that retailers generally are desirous of a more practical approach to retail education while academicians often stress more theoretical notions. The effective integration of retail theory and practice is also deemed important and serious enough to be the subject of the American Marketing Association's First Annual Faculty Consortium, at which retail educators will, in workshop fashion, discuss ways to more effectively integrate the theoretical and practical sides of this thorny educational issue.

It is in the spirit of this dialogue that I wish to discuss a case example of how retail education may be effectively integrated with inputs of both theory and practical experience.

At U.S.C., the retailing program is heavily based on research. Seven of ten full-time faculty members are actively involved in retail or distribution research. Further, students are also involved in research activities, often with industry support. The food retailing class, for example, annually conducts a large survey relating to some facet of the supermarket industry - this year's study will deal with the "Single Shopper". Students in the general retailing emphasis have just completed a pricing study, and graduate students have been engaged, with faculty members, in retail case development (for example, with Carter Hawley Hale Stores).

Active involvement of the retail community is also sought at U.S.C. Typically, guest speakers are drawn from a broad spectrum of retail stores and functional areas. A special effort is made to bring back previous U.S.C. students to class to speak on their current positions, and to discuss the mix of theory and practical knowledge that goes into their jobs. Retail personnel are also actively pursued for their input to classroom topics. Retail placement activities, day on the job programs, and career counselling are all additional ways in which active retailer participation in campus activities is encouraged. An internship program is in the planning stages.

An effort is made to feature innovative and experimental classroom activities throughout the retail program. For example, one activity which is especially effective features role playing and simulations to focus on important facets of the retail buyer's role. Other effective exercises involve role playing of the retail sales positions, buyer-vendor relationships, and "personnel" matters. Some of these are videotaped and are very effective learning tools. Case studies are also used to supplement classroom activities. A locational case we are developing, for example, has been used with a subsequent visit by retail management of the featured firm to discuss the resolution/ issues as they actually went through them.

The above applications are illustrative of some possible ways in which the existing gap in retail education may eventually be resolved. The intent of this paper has largely been to stimulate thought and debate about the nature of retail education as it is perceived and carried out in four-year programs. Hopefully, the end result may be more effective, stimulating, and effective retail course offering.

#### REFERENCES

Coe, Barbara Davis (1978), "Business School Faculty Beliefs About Retailing in the Business Curriculum", Journal of Retailing, 54, (3), 45-52.