

## HOW WELL ARE WE MEETING THE NEEDS OF MARKETING STUDENTS?: A TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT

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### BECOMING LEARNER CENTERED

Being learner centered is nothing more than adopting the marketing concept. Thus, as always, marketing departments should make a determination of consumer needs and then find a way to satisfy these needs. There are several reasons to learn how students and alumni perceive the quality and relevance of their education. First, is to keep in touch and help them feel connected to the University and the school of business. Second, is to gain feedback. With this information, it is then possible to engage in continuous improvement. Ability to have graduates who feel that the skills and knowledge they have learned meets or exceeds their expectations may be a key to survival.

### METHODOLOGY

It was felt that before undertaking any curriculum revision and up-dating we needed to assess what our students thought about their education. The student portion of the sample was from all of the seniors in our program. A questionnaire in an envelope with her/his name on the outside was delivered to each senior. The graduates who were sampled by mail, included all marketing option graduates in the past four years. Responses were anonymous. No follow up contacts were made. After adjusting the sample size for inaccurate addresses, a 31% (110 of 352) response rate from alumni was realized. As might be expected, a somewhat larger 62% (74 of 118) response rate was obtained from senior marketing students.

### TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT OF PERCEPTIONS

It was determined that it would not be necessary to "invent" a survey instrument. Other studies had been conducted at other universities and in other disciplines. By adopting and adapting any instruments which had been used in previous studies, it was possible to speed up the task of

assessment. In fact, two previously validated instruments were used as the basis for one portion of the questionnaire. (Dudley 1995 & Carcello 1991) Prior to making the selection of an existing instrument to adapt, a list of needed information was created. These items were then segregated into three broad categories: items associated with skills, items associated with working conditions, and items associated with interactions. In order to accomplish this task the attached questionnaire (Appendix "A") was distributed to all senior marketing majors. Another questionnaire with the same questions but soliciting slightly different perceptions was mailed to a list of recent (within the last four years) marketing majors. Another version, for our graduates, was also prepared but is not included. Both questionnaires contained the same questions, however, each solicited slightly different perceptions. The only difference was in the introduction to each of the questions. i.e. If students were asked . . . "Do you expect to find the people with whom you work to be ethical?" Alumni were asked . . . "Are the people with whom you work ethical?" Students were asked whether they felt the education they were receiving would give them adequate preparation in \_\_\_\_ for their career in the marketing profession. Alumni were asked whether they felt the education they had received gave them adequate preparation in \_\_\_\_ for their career in the marketing profession.

As noted, two questionnaires from previous studies were very similar. Therefore, by adding to the questions they had used, it was possible to replicate what they had done in evaluating perceptions of work environment while simultaneously checking on whether skills being taught met market place needs.

Another advantage of a previously tested survey instrument was the ability to establish a ready-to-use benchmark, responses from graduates in other fields. Knowledge of how our students and alumni matched with other disciplines and other universities helped us assess our degree of success in meeting

alumni needs and meeting student expectations. Responses from alumni and students of accounting and finance studies gave us a dual focus. Business school faculty teaching Accounting students have traditionally been production oriented and seek to prepare students to become C.P.A.'s and thus for entry level job expectations. On the other hand, preparation of finance majors is more or less like marketing in that students are prepared for managerial positions and higher level career needs in addition to entry level skills. Further, validation of the instrument was not necessary since the multiple use provided a needed test of response and response validity. Although not a perfect validation, it is much better than is usually possible with a single use instrument.

### ASSESSMENT OF RESPONSES

A full report of responses is not necessarily a part of a paper designed to help others select a useful survey document. However, such a report is useful in helping those who decide to make the survey instrument a part of their evaluation process. They may want to assess their results by comparing them to these findings. In other words helping future users benchmark with ease.

Respondents from the student population were compared on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with alumni responses to like statements on the questionnaire. The Chi Square test was used to determine whether alumni and students were alike or different in their perception. An abbreviated set of results is provided in Tables 1 and 2. This table contains only those variables which were significant because application of a chi square test generated a statistic with a statistical probability of .10 or greater. That is, where the chi square indicated that there was no match of student expectations with alumni retrospective views. A .10 (10%) level of significance was selected since the effect of accepting a type II error was not apt to be catastrophic. In other words, even had there been acceptance of a difference between students and alumni as true, when it was in fact false, no real harm would be done. If faculty exert more effort at aligning materials presented with materials needed by employers, no one would say this is of negative value. Whenever the probability of a chi square statistic being as large or larger than the one we obtained was less than .10, it was interpreted as cause to examine how to reduce this perception or expectation in future iterations of this study. In a

few years, there can be a report of longitudinal successes (hopefully no failures). It will detail efforts exerted in providing students with skills needed for success and with information to help them bring their expectations into closer alignment with the environment in which they will work.

Table 1 should be read as follows: look at question 7 a skill question which ended in a difference of opinion. Students thought they were not getting enough education on spreadsheet applications whereas alumni said they felt they had received enough spreadsheet education.

**TABLE 1**

Responses to Questions on Adequacy of Skills Which Produced a Chi Square Statistic With a Probability of Less Than .1000

QST. NO.	WERE YOU PROVIDED ADEQUATE PREPARATION IN	PROB- ABILITY	Do students feel preparation is sufficient?	Do Alumni feel preparation is sufficient?
7	Spreadsheet applications in marketing	6.44%	Not enough	Adequate
11	Preparing marketing plans	9.89%	Not enough	Adequate
12	Making customer presentations	8.81%	Adequate	Not adequate

Table 2 should be read as follows: look at question 13 on the work environment. Students thought they were entering a career where they would find frequent intellectual challenge. Whereas alumni said they felt environment in which they worked did not provide frequent intellectual challenge.

**TABLE 2**

Responses to Questions on Work Environment Which Produced a Chi Square Statistic With a Probability of Less Than .1000

QST. NO.	DO STUDENTS EXPECT DID ALUMNI FIND	PROB- ABILITY	Students YES OR NO?	Alumni YES OR NO?
13	Frequent intellectual challenges	9.93%	Expected	Didn't Happen
20	Adequate on-the-job training	0.035%	Expected	Didn't Happen
21	People will answer my questions	9.30%	Expected	Didn't Happen
22	Support for continuing education	0.07%	Expected	Didn't Happen
23	To be treated as a professional	0.27%	Expected	Didn't Happen
24	To have timely evaluations of performance	0.26%	Expected	Didn't Happen
25	To compete with my peers	9.24%	Not expected	Happened
26	To have high ethical standards	0.21%	Not expected	Happened
28	Stable predictable work plans	0.32%	Expected	Didn't Happen
29	Travel no more than 2 nights per week	0.70%	Expected	Didn't Happen
30	Income goes up with more work	0.38%	Expected	Didn't Happen
37	Area work or expect to work	0.18%	More in sales	Fewer in sales

It should be noted that there are other possible means of data analysis. T tests could be used to assess the variance in mean responses. Additionally, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test could be used to test not only differences in groups but magnitude or direction of the difference.

In an effort to provide other potential users of this instrument with further validation, a factor analysis was employed to determine whether the questions asked proved to be useful constructs. Frequently, researchers use factor analysis as a means of reducing a large number of variables into smaller clusters which will be used in future research to help reduce the size of questionnaires. However, the primary role of factor analysis for this study was to evaluate the underlying constructs of the data. Factory analysis provided eight (8) factors from responses to questions one (1) through twenty eight (28). Table 3 illustrates that each of the factors support very distinct constructs of perceptions and expectations. Note that variable numbers do not correspond directly to question numbers due to coding restrictions. These eight (8) factors explained 67% of the variance in the responses. Thus, our endeavor to probe the constructs which are of importance to businesses was successful. Factor analytic tables are in Appendix "B". For the potential adopter of this instrument, this means that the value of the questions is supported by examining the interaction of responses. Greater reliance on the outcome can be expected when one knows in advance that underlying constructs are valid.

### IMPLICATIONS

Once the results are in, the next step is to determine the exact extent or means by which faculty in the marketing discipline can react to this information. Logically, some action should be taken to acknowledge the educational responsibility for most if not all of these areas. Possibilities range from design of a new course, to tweaking an existing course. A reassessment of requirements and prerequisites is also a possibility. Where prerequisite courses are not willing to adapt to needs, it may be necessary to include more specific input of prerequisite information into the start of a few courses, i.e. writing skills for Marketing students.

The world is changing and we must keep up. Demands on students today are different than they

TABLE 3

### Questions Assembled into Logical Clusters Via Factor Analysis

FACTOR ONE	ORAL COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS
1.	Verbal communication skills
3.	Team work skills
4.	Superior/subordinate skills
10.	Making customer presentations
FACTOR TWO	COMPUTER SKILLS
2.	Written communication skills
5.	Word processing skills
6.	Data base applications in marketing
7.	Spread sheet applications
FACTOR THREE	EXPECTATIONS OF SUPPORT
14.	Working in marketing will provide me with the opportunity to learn a substantial amount about other functional areas of a business
16.	Marketing professionals to be held in high regard by the general public
18.	To receive adequate on-the-job training
19.	That a knowledgeable supervisor will be available to answer my questions
20.	To be treated as a professional
21.	The firm to offer assistance and be supportive in helping me strengthen my educational background
22.	To receive timely and constructive evaluations of my performance.
25.	My professional responsibilities will not interfere with my social and personal activities.
FACTOR FOUR	PROFESSIONALISM
12.	Marketing to be an interesting profession
24.	The firm and my associate to maintain the highest ethical standards
FACTOR FIVE	COMPETITION
17.	To be responsible for supervising staff members within two years of employment
23.	To encounter considerable competition on the job from among my peers.
FACTOR SIX	TIME REQUIREMENTS
13.	To find that others perceive that marketing provides an important public service
27.	That my job will keep me away from home no more than two nights per week.
28.	My Income to reflect the hours I work,....
FACTOR SEVEN	RESPONSIBILITIES
15.	My job in marketing will involve few, if any, menial job responsibilities.
26.	To be able to have daily work plans that are relatively stable and predictable.
FACTOR EIGHT	PLANNING SKILLS
8.	Building and allocating a budget
9.	Development of marketing plans

were just eight years ago. When was the last time your program was changed? Are we aware of the new set of demands? How many years have businesses complained that students with University degrees are unable to handle Interpersonal conflict, write letters, and think critically? Since 1990 the number of high school graduates who say they want to pursue a university education in business careers dropped from 23% to 13% (Business Week, 1994).

That is why knowing what our students want and need today is but a first step. Marketers must focus on student's needs. Remedies for areas where student perceptions do not match alumni perceptions of their work will affect the direction of our program. Without the type of input provided by this survey instrument, it will be difficult to know when to reevaluate a marketing program. Without this data it would be even more difficult to know how to revamp a marketing curriculum.

This methodology may not be perfect but it is much better than traditional eight to ten year reviews based on what faculty assume to be true and confirmed by unreliable anecdotal faculty inputs. It was not uncommon for these unsystematic reviews to end in no action. One goal of any service provider, if you believe what you read, is to reduce the variance between what students (customers) perceive a career in marketing will be like and what our graduates experience in their careers. This paper has not proposed the end product of a review but the first step in a longitudinal review process. Marketing departments which are interested in taking a pro-active position in curricular design need to: a.) collect this data on a regular basis (probably each two years) b.) fine tune courses and curriculum in response to new input c.) keep up with marketing trends. This survey instrument provides a tool for all who want to be constantly moving toward improved quality in a systematic fashion.

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