

AN EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP: APPLYING MARKETING CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT

A brief description of an experiential learning technique to correlate marketing course concepts with present business practices. The article answers the questions of what is it, why use it, who does what, and does it work. Included are a list of each participant's roles and responsibilities and an example of course requirements for out-of-class student activities.

WHAT IS IT?

An Education Partnership is a commitment by a business firm to actively assist in the education of college students. The business firm agrees to participate in the education process by providing opportunities for a student or team of students to utilize the firm in much the same way that a laboratory is used for the sciences. The firm provides for the observation of its operations: provides personnel to respond to students' questions and to discuss their observations, analyses and recommendations; and reads and acknowledges the students' final report of their observations and analyses in relation to classroom concepts and generalizations.

WHY USE IT?

Schools of business marketing faculty have and continue to utilize a variety of approaches to infuse current business practices with the marketing concepts of the classroom. Impetus for their efforts has come from a number of sources, not the least of which have been numerous articles and speeches admonishing business school faculty for not placing increased emphasis on current application of academic content.

Marketing educators have responded to those requests and have implemented a number of concept application techniques. On-campus approaches include case analyses, readings, reports, simulations, and outside speakers. Off-campus approaches to concept application include case problem development, Small Business Institute cases, full-time and part-time internships, cooperative training programs, field trips, and specific process observations.

The Education Partnership program was developed to provide students a quarter or semester long integrated series of specific observations and analyses relating marketing concepts to business practices. The program was developed as an alternative to other possible approaches so as to:

1. utilize business community resources in their environment;
2. provide students a first-hand knowledge of a variety of current operational applications of course concepts; and

3. maintain the academic integrity and control of the off-campus experience.

Business Community Resources

By and large, the available educational resources of a business community, whether of a large metropolitan area or of a small city, are underutilized as a supplement to the on-campus education process. The technique utilized those available resources in their own environments on an extended basis without the financial requirements common with internships and cooperative on-the-job programs. The concept of the business community being offered the opportunity to assist in the process of educating students for business has great appeal to business people.

First-hand Knowledge Through Application of Course Concepts

The application of concepts by students in a structured manner for analysis and problem solving has long been an instructional methodology for marketing education. The more true-to-life the applications are, the more educationally stimulating and productive are the activities. The approach provides for concurrent development of concept knowledge and business environment applications, rather than assume that concept application will be made at some later date.

Academic Integrity

The faculty's coordinating and control functions for the integration of on- and off-campus activities provide for the academic integrity of the technique. The degree of academic correlation and rigor of the technique, as with any methodology, resides with the faculty. The depth and extent of the students' business laboratory experiences and the relation of those experiences to course content and emphasis are determined by and controlled by the marketing faculty.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Each of the three parties involved; the faculty, the business firm, and the students, has specific roles and responsibilities in the Education Partnership (Exhibit 1).

Faculty

The faculty is the catalyst for the partnership as well as providing the direction and control for the academic integrity of the program. A number of planning and organizational steps are required before the businesses are contracted to obtain their commitment to participate in the partnership.

Having used internships, cooperative on-the-job training, SBI-type projects, short-term observations and analysis as well as simulations, case analyses, on-campus laboratories, and so forth, my experience has been that the Education Partnership approach requires no more faculty energy than any of the other approaches. In fact, the faculty "time cost" was well within the usual time commitment expected for course preparation, up-dating, grading, etc. A caveat is that faculty occupational knowledge is most beneficial.

An initial step is the faculty's decision to seek the assistance of the business community for specific educational purposes and outcomes. This step determines what in general is to be undertaken in a business environment laboratory as well as why business firms are to be utilized. Subsequent steps include specifying in written form the roles and responsibilities of each partner and the learning activities of the students, both on- and off-campus. Exhibit 2 is an example of activities used for a Retail Management course.

The specified roles, responsibilities, and learning activities also serve as progress reference points during the course and as outcome evaluation criteria. The faculty should use the lists not only for securing verbal or written commitment by management to participate in or sanction the activities of the partnership and as course information for students, but also to inform other publics of the program. The broader the distribution of information about the program, the more supportive are business and university personnel and the easier it becomes to secure participation for subsequent courses.

Assurance of the academic relevance of the off-campus activities requires faculty direction and control. For example, I have found that the selection of the firms to participate in the partnership during a term for a course was best determined by the faculty so as to obtain a variety of organizational structures, sizes, operational procedures, etc. that I felt were necessary to achieve the intended educational goals for the course. Such variety facilitates in-class directed discussions and team presentations of the similarities and the differences of business practices in relation to the course concepts. In addition, coordinating in-class and out-of-class learning calls for guiding the business laboratory learning for the timely completion of assigned observations. The use of scheduled readings, discussion topics, and presentations in conjunction with periodic on-site visits and

conferences with the firm's personnel and with the students, as well as written progress reports and periodic activity evaluations promotes academic integrity and educational relevance of the Education Partnership.

In addition to providing a learning delivery system, the partnership provides professional opportunities for the faculty through case writing possibilities, research, presentations, and consulting work, to name a few added benefits.

Business Firm

The business firm serves as a laboratory for observation, information gathering, and analysis of business practices. The commitment of top management to assist in the education process should include not only their participation but also participation of other personnel in the firm. A variety of involved personnel spreads the time commitment to the program as well as provides students both breadth and depth of exposure to operations and information sources. While there is a time commitment for the firm, there are no financial obligations other than the possible loss of productive time while assisting the student team to obtain information and when discussing the team's analyses and recommendations.

The business' review of the student report, and the acknowledging signature, promotes and adds to their sense of participation in the education process. While their role does not include grading the report, I have yet to receive a report that did not contain one to two pages of assessment comments regarding the correctness of contents and the feasibility of the students' recommendations.

Student

The student has a number of responsibilities in the Education Partnership. The student's role has similarities to the role of a consultant. The observations and information gathering activities are preceded by the accumulation of academic knowledge in order to know what to look for, what questions to ask to obtain specific information, and as a basis for analysis of the accumulated information. In order to accomplish the overall task within the time constraints of an academic term, the scheduling of activities and time management are essential. While a highly motivated student can meet the course requirements, student teams are more efficient in information gathering and analysis. When organized into teams, the dimension of team goal setting, responsibility delegation and team consensus are added to the learning experience. The student's responsibilities also call for opportunity and constraint analyses as part of the problem solving task. And, like a consultant, a report of findings, assessment of alternative courses of action, and recommendations and implementation strategies is given to the management of the firm for their consideration.

DOES IT WORK?

Follow-up evaluations of the Education Partnership, both solicited and unsolicited, by businesses, students and university personnel have been very positive from my experience. Businesses appreciate the opportunity to aid in the education process, especially of individuals interested in their line of work and who may be potential employees. They viewed the individual reports in much the same light as consultant's reports, as objective analyses of their firm. An added benefit at institutions where I have used the Education Partnership has been a more positive image of the total business program and its student population.

Evaluation ratings by participating firms resulted in assessment on a 4 point scale, 1 being poor and 4 being very good, that the overall experience with the students was assessed at a 3.5. The perceived value of the student team's final report to the firm received the lowest rating at 3.25. The highest rating of 3.68 was given for the students' interest and enthusiasm during the project. Informal assessment of participating firms' opinion of the Education Partnership was also made from the number of firms seeking information about or future participation in the partnership due to their contacts with personnel in firms that participated in the partnership.

Student assessment and support of the program has been much more positive than I initially anticipated. The anticipated levels of involvement and achievement were, in the main, exceeded due to student motivation and commitment to the partnership concept. The overall evaluations of the in-class and out-of-class activities and requirements rated a 3.83 on a 4 point scale with 1 being no value and 4 being very worthwhile. The on-site observation and analysis activities were rated at 3.97 and the ability of the required report to bring together text information and businesses' operational practices was given a rating of 3.73.

While the students assessed the program as quite rigorous and time demanding, their comments and recommendations to other students were reflected in increased enrollments and in subsequent course enrollees' positive comments and enthusiasm. At the end of each term the students' course evaluation form included their recommendations for size of teams, assignment to teams and to firms, and team task assignments. Team size recommendations were 66.7% for three person teams and 33.3% for two person teams with no one recommending individual involvement. Assignment into teams showed 63.3% favored self-selection, 20% favored instructor assignment, and 16.7% favored a combination of instructor and student determination of team membership. Team assignment to a firm by the instructor was the recommendation by over 95% of the students. A possible reason for such a high response was the instructor's use of the results of an interest survey at the beginning of the course and

early knowledge of participating firms. The other major organizational consideration was the responsibility for making task assignments within a team. Students preferred to handle that role by a margin of 77.3% to 22.7% for instructor assigned tasks.

In addition, a variety of university personnel and other businesses expressed their opinion on the Education Partnership technique's positive public relations benefits to the marketing department, the School of Business, and the institution.

From a personal perspective as a marketing educator and a former business person, I have utilized a broad range of education techniques, and while I continue to use them as they seem most appropriate for a situation, I am a staunch advocate of the Education Partnership for off-campus directed application of academic learning.

TRY IT! YOU MAY LIKE IT!

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1.

The Education Partnership

Purpose: To form an Education Partnership of the business community and the marketing program so as to provide current operational applications to academic learning. The involvement of the business community will provide marketing students with practical knowledge to augment their collegiate program.

Firm's Obligation:

- To provide opportunities for a student team, 2 to 3 students, to observe and analyze the firm's operations.
- To provide opportunities for the firm's personnel to discuss the student team's analyses when appropriate.
- To review the student team's term report before submission to the faculty for assessment.
- To be in-class resource participants.

IT IS NOT--to provide student employment or an internship.

Students's Obligation:

- To observe and analyze the host firm's practices and procedures in relation to textbook theory.
- To discuss observations and analyses with the host firm's personnel for accuracy.
- To discuss nonconfidential matters in class sessions. All such discussions are to be factual, analytical and constructive learning inputs.

- To prepare a detailed analysis of the host firm's practices and procedures in relation to course theories.
- To be professional in appearance and manner when in contact with the host firm.

Faculty Obligation:

- To obtain commitments of business firms to participate as host learning laboratories.
- To be the contact person in all matters relating to the organization and operation of the program.
- To provide a list of observation and analysis activities to host firms and students.
- To be responsible for academic aspects of the program.

Exhibit 2.

An abbreviated example of term project and report observations and analyses for a course in Retail Management (designed to coordinate with Duncan, Hollander and Savitt, Modern Retail Management, 10th ed., Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1983.)

TERM PROJECT: Following areas are the minimum requirement.

Section I

- A. Background description of the retail area, prior economic and historical impacts, and trade area demographics.
- B. Describe current economic conditions and their impact on the firm.
- C. Describe the direct indirect competition to the firm by others by their type of firm, merchandising, location, pricing, promotion, etc.
- D. Specify the firm's marketing philosophy and objectives.

Section II

- A. Describe the firm's store ambiance.
- B. Diagram the firm's existing layout on graph paper; using sufficient detail to show departments/divisions furniture, fixtures, traffic patterns, work areas, storage, etc.
 - 1. Superimpose on the diagram in red ink/pencil your recommendations for change.
 - 2. Describe the anticipated advantages for each of your recommended changes.

Section III

- A. Diagram, or include a copy of, the firm's formal store organizational chart. Outline position responsibilities.
- B. Describe the firm's existing human resource management processes and specify the area(s) that might be improved and your recommendations for improvement.
- C. Analyze one first level job and write job task analyses, job description, and job specification for that job.

Have your host review the description and specification for compliance with current labor legislation and contract provisions.

- D. Propose employee evaluation systems for two first level jobs, one sales position and the other a sales support position. Have you host review your proposals for compliance with current labor legislation and contract provisions.

(CONTACT AUTHOR FOR THE COMPLETE TERM PROJECT ASSIGNMENT)

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