

Innovating Marketing Undergraduate Curriculum: How Integrating Courses at the Undergraduate Level Enhance Skills and Competencies for New Hires Entering the Workplace

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Abstract

The marketing field continues to evolve as the functions within organizations are constantly changing. New hires are finding that along with the evolving landscape they need to be able to master their field of expertise to work well with others both inside and outside their respective organizations. This dynamic environment is increasing pressure on how universities prepare undergraduate students for careers in marketing.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how revisions to marketing undergraduate curriculum can better prepare undergraduate students for careers (e.g., career readiness). Based on field interviews, managers note that gaps exist in undergraduate curriculum as it is intended to prepare students for the workplace, more importantly as students advance their careers. While there have been many proposed changes to curriculum, we take a broader look at how curriculum can be adapted and be made adaptable to the dynamic environment.

Our study focuses on two areas. First, we explore the knowledge new hires need to be successful in their roles in marketing. For domain knowledge, we investigate specific marketing expertise and how marketing topics integrate (thus bolstering cross-functional expertise) from a marketing knowledge standpoint. Second, we study how integrative curriculum better provides new hires the skills and competencies essential for when working with others in the workplace. Similar to previous research considering skills and competencies of undergraduate students, we use the The Tailored Design Method to administer a survey to gather data in order to investigate these research questions further.

Keywords: *marketing management, marketing education, skills, competencies, and curriculum.*

Introduction

Aspiring marketers often consider seeking undergraduate education to develop skillsets considered necessary for the workplace. Accordingly, undergraduate business programs generally offer curriculum to enhance the career readiness of these applicants. Yet some practitioners contend that graduates from such programs lack particular skillsets to be successful in the workplace, thus increasing the need for employers to increase their investments in new hires due to additional training being needed.

In this study, we explore whether a gap exists between what academics believe are the critical skillsets needed by marketing undergraduates upon completion and what employers consider the requisite skillsets these undergraduates need upon commencement of employment. We explore the domain of adult learning in higher education and human resource development by employers by comparing and contrasting the skill sets that academics believe are important for students and the skill sets that employers seek not only for career readiness, but also career advancement.

Conceptual Framework

2.1 Human Resource Development

Broadly, within an organization the human resource development function is responsible for the development on employee growth as well as helping the organization achieve its goals. Thus, there is a clear connection to both the input side for the firm for talent acquisition and the development of such talent. Accordingly, the process of selecting appropriate new hires is critical from an investment standpoint and also from the perspective of the additional investment needed in bringing new hires up to speed for the needs of the organization.

The concept of adult learning is important to consider when not only determining gaps in knowledge bases, but also how adults learn. As shown in Figure 1 (c.f., Knowles, Holton, Swanson, and Robinson, 2020), there are four phases in the adult learning process. From the figure, phase 1 involves needs, and includes the learning needed to aid in the achievement of goals. Create (phase 2) is the development of strategy and accrual of resources to achieve the goals from the previous phase. Implement (phase 3) is the execution of the strategy and application of resources to achieve the learning goal. Finally in phase 4, evaluate is the assessment on whether learning was achieved.

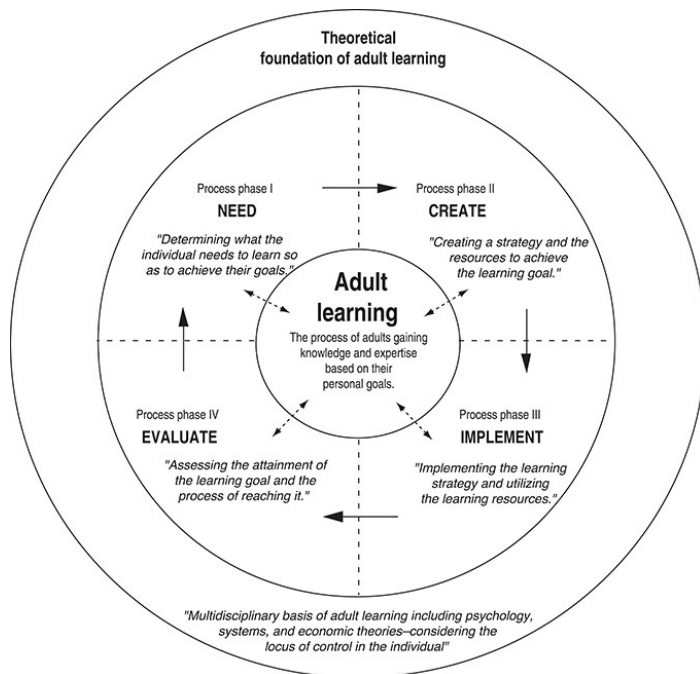


Figure 1. Phases of Adult Learning

Ideally, new hires will have personal goals that are consistent with those of the firm when starting but may also aspire for career enhancement. It would be reasonable to assume that new hires would want skill sets that aid functional knowledge as well as those needed to aid in advancing one’s own career. For this paper, we focus on the pertinent aspects of need, create, and implement to the development of talent at educational institutions and the hiring by employers.

When employers seek out new hires with undergraduate degrees, they are aligning their need (phase 1) with higher education systems’ ability provide assistance in working with undergraduates in performing phases 2 and 3. Employers stand to have reduced human resource development costs when new hires from undergraduate programs have the knowledge and skills needed. For the purpose of the remaining paper, new hires include those individuals who have recently graduated students from undergraduate marketing programs.

Though firms seek to hire new hires for specific tasks in mind, increasingly firms are requiring employees to have a better understanding not only of the holistic marketing function but also the how marketing activities also fit within the broader activities of the

organization. This is challenging due to the rapid rate that marketing is evolving and running up against the often slow and cumbersome process of curriculum design and delivery. From the perspective of employers hiring new hires who have taken marketing management,

Proposition 1a: employers find that new hires are increasingly lacking in functional expertise in marketing.

Proposition 1b: employers find that new hires are deficient in their understanding on how marketing activities have an effect on the broader organization.

Proposition 1c: employers find that new hires need additional training to develop the skills needed to transition into managerial positions.

Interestingly the argument made by employers regarding graduates is flipped for the new hires themselves, as new hires often overestimate their knowledge, skillsets, and abilities. When evaluating themselves,

Proposition 2a: new hires who have taken a marketing management course believe they have functional expertise in marketing.

Proposition 2b: new hires who have taken a marketing management course believe they have an understanding on how marketing activities effect the broader organization.

Proposition 2c: new hires who have taken a marketing management course believe they already have the skills needed to transition into managerial positions.

It is unclear what is driving the gap between employers and new hires. Thus, it may be beneficial to study the curriculum itself from the perspective of academics. Previously it has been discussed marketing academics might not interact with practitioners as much, and in the case of market research there is a gap between the delivery of content to the needs perceived by employers (Stern and Tseng, 2002). Thus, we believe the same holds true also for coursework in marketing management. Accordingly,

Proposition 3a: academics believe current marketing management curriculum prepares new hires with adequate functional expertise in marketing.

Proposition 3b: academics believe current marketing management curriculum prepares new hires with an understanding on how marketing activities effect the broader organization.

Proposition 3c: academics believe current marketing management curriculum prepares new hires with the skills needed to transition into managerial positions.

To study this gap further, we contend that programs that have explicit mechanisms to enhance integration (e.g., McCollough and Shook, 2017) and/or either application or experiential learning (e.g., Bridges, 1999; Craciun and Corrigan, 2010) will have trained undergraduates who not only better meet functional needs by employers but will also have faster career trajectories due to a more holistic understanding of marketing. Thus, when compared to programs with less obvious integration and fewer applied and experiential learning opportunities,

Proposition 4a: employers hiring undergraduates from programs with greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning in marketing management, find that the new hires have greater functional expertise in marketing.

Proposition 4b: employers hiring undergraduates from programs with greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning in marketing management have better understanding on how marketing activities have an effect on the broader organization.

Proposition 4c: employers hiring undergraduates from programs with greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning in marketing management need less additional training to develop the skills needed to transition into managerial positions.

Within integrated and highly applied undergraduate marketing programs, academics are better connected with employers and are able to tailor the foundational knowledge in courses and seek out relevant applied learning opportunities. Thus,

Proposition 5a: academics delivering marketing management curriculum that has greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning are better able to prepare new hires with adequate functional expertise in marketing.

Proposition 5b: academics delivering marketing management curriculum that has greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning are better able to prepare new hires with an understanding on how marketing activities effect the broader organization.

Proposition 5c: academics delivering marketing management curriculum that has greater integration, applied learning, and experiential learning are better able to prepare new hires with the skills needed to transition into managerial positions.

Methodology

Using field interviews, we first tested the nomological network with a group of practitioners to verify the relationships being considered. Accordingly, we began the development of the survey instrument, and using the Total Design Method (Dillman, 2007), we develop the instrument to maximize respondent participation. This methodology has been used before when assessing undergraduate competencies (e.g., Zekeri, 2004). We pretested the survey instrument with a group of seven marketing faculty and practitioners involved with the hiring of marketing undergraduates. Any changes proposed were incorporated into the final survey instrument.

For data collection, our methodology is consistent with previously performed research exploring the gap between academia and employers (e.g., Stern and Tseng, 2002) by gathering data from both employers and academics. We augment the process further, by also gathering data from new hires who have recently completed undergraduate marketing programs. During summer 2021, we have worked to complete the survey instrument and pretesting it with a sample of academics and practitioners. We adapt existing scales for our use. For Fall 2021, we will contact 500 marketing managers and marketing faculty within the United States to solicit participation in the study. The sample of marketing managers will be selected from a commercially available list of firms. Marketing faculty (all ranks) will be sought from accredited business institutions.

Conclusion

While we are still conducting the study, we are finding results that support our propositions that there are differences between what academics believe undergraduate students need and what the marketplace is seeking from undergraduates.

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