

## BUSINESS NEEDS AND GRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOL OFFERINGS IN MARKETING

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if a gap exists in the skill and knowledge businesses require of marketing employees and what the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited schools actually provide. In this quantitative study, two sets of data were collected and compared, and a gap analysis conducted. A questionnaire was used to obtain data from members of the Business Marketing Association (BMA) regarding course preferences that would best prepare students for positions in marketing. Records analysis was then undertaken of the marketing course offerings of AACSB accredited MBA programs offering an emphasis in Marketing. Gap analysis was conducted by applying a test of difference to the results of the two data collection efforts. Results of the study suggest that some misalignment between school offerings and business needs exists.

### BACKGROUND

The number of business programs offered in the U.S., combined with the development of corporate business training programs, has made the academic field of business the focus of discussion regarding relevance of curricular content (Cranier and Dearlove 1999). Demands for improved quality coming from businesses, government, and parents have forced business schools to reexamine their traditional operating methods (Merritt 2003).

Criticism of academic business programs, especially at the MBA level is multifaceted. Some suggest that the bureaucratic nature of academia interferes with business school responsiveness (Cranier and Dearlove 1999). Others observe that business schools are too far removed from the business environment to provide practical business knowledge and skills (Richards-Wilson 2002). It is also suggested that the dynamic nature of the business environment makes it difficult for curricular changes to be made in enough time to keep the educational material relevant (Ackerman, Gross, and Perner 2003; Hahs 1999).

Many studies have been conducted in the marketing education literature showing attempts by the

and Stoner 1992; Baruck and Peiperl 2000; Borin and Watkins 1998; Duke 2002; Ellen and Pilling 2002; academic community to address these issues (Arora Louw, Bosch, and Venter 2001; Scott and Frontczak 1996). The primary goals commonly cited for conducting these studies are the desire to improve program relevance, and pressure from accrediting agencies, most notably the AACSB, the premier agency that offers accreditation for business schools in the U.S., for improved curricular quality.

Understanding the extent to which there is a gap between what is needed by businesses and what is offered; and where, if any, inconsistencies exist is important in designing graduate business marketing curricula that best prepare students for employment in positions utilizing MBA prepared employees (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken 2002).

### METHOD

The question of whether a gap exists in what is needed by the business community and what schools provided required two sets of data. One set, Employer Needs, would address what businesses believed were important courses for students seeking employment in marketing. The second set, AACSB Graduate Business School Offerings would address what business schools offer in marketing curricula.

#### Employer needs

The target population for information pertaining to employer expectations of business school offerings was management-level marketing professionals from across the U.S. employed in a marketing function within an organization. In order to isolate marketing professionals from other functional business area executives, the population for this study consisted of those Business Marketing Association (BMA) members attending the Association's 2004 annual conference. The BMA is a professional association serving middle management marketing executives. Registration for the conference in 2004 was 126, and a census of this population was conducted to yield a list of graduate marketing courses thought by these attendees to be important for employment in the field of marketing.

## AACSB Graduate Business School Offerings

Of the 435 AACSB accredited business programs in the United States, 180 offer an MBA with an emphasis in marketing. This group of 180 was the population of interest for this study, and a census of these 180 schools was conducted. The population of 180 AACSB accredited programs offering a marketing emphasis is different from the larger number of accredited business programs because these schools offer a specific or expanded array of marketing courses not offered in general MBA programs or MBA programs with an emphasis different from marketing. The bulletin of courses for each AACSB accredited program offering an MBA with an emphasis in marketing was consulted.

For each school, the number of marketing courses offered in common with the Employer Needs List, that is Marketing Strategy, B-to-B Marketing, Advertising, Electronic Marketing, and Marketing Research, was found and recorded. Then each school was given a score of 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, which represented the number of courses the school offered that were common to the five courses listed on the Employer Needs List. The school was given a zero if it had no courses in common with the Employer Needs List; a one if the school had one course in common; and so on, up to a score of five if the school offered all five courses in common with the Employer Needs List.

### MEASUREMENT

The survey instrument used for this study was derived from the work of Ellen and Pilling (2002) in their examination of data collected from employers in the geographic area surrounding Georgia State University. The Ellen and Pilling study and the specific survey instrument used in their research are important to this study. First, the structure of the data provided by the survey instrument was such that it could be compared with a school's course offerings. The data however could also be compared with a cumulative list of marketing course offerings at U.S. AACSB accredited business schools offering a specialization in marketing. Results of this study could also be compared to the earlier study.

The Ellen and Pilling (2002) survey instrument then influenced the methodology for this study. The structure of survey questions on the measurement prescribed the type of data analysis conduct if comparison between the two studies would be conducted. A statistical test of differences was conducted to assess whether a difference existed in the proportion of schools offering 4-5 courses in common with the employer list versus those offering 0-3 courses in common.

## RESULTS

Of the members attending the BMA's 2004 conference, 126 individuals were preregistered, that is, they had mailed their registration information and fees to the association prior to the first day of the conference. Of those who preregistered, 126 members actually attended, as measured by the number of registrants who picked up their registration packets upon checking into the conference. The response rate for the survey was 93%.

The frequency of offering 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 courses is shown in Table 1. The schools were then assigned to one of two groups, those offering 0-3 classes in common with the Employer Needs List and those offering 4-5 in common. The proportion of the total represented by each of these two groups was then calculated. The differences between these proportions were then tested using Fisher's Exact Test.

**TABLE 1**  
**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS BY NUMBER OF**  
**COURSES OFFERED IN COMMON WITH**  
**EMPLOYER NEEDS LIST**

Courses in common	n	%
Five	10	6
Four	38	20.1
Three	55	31.1
Two	36	20
One	35	19
Zero	6	3.8
Total	180	100

Of the 180 schools offering an MBA program with an emphasis in marketing, 48 schools, or 26%, had 4-5 courses in common. The remaining 133 schools, or 74%, had three or fewer courses in common with the Employer Needs List, and were in this study, considered to represent a gap between needs and offerings. Therefore the null hypothesis was rejected with a p value of less than 0.0001.

### DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

In this study the majority proportion (74%), of AACSB accredited U.S. business school course offerings differed from the list of courses identified by businesses. This suggests more could be done to align business needs and school offerings. Efforts for improvement may include examining the input of different stakeholders, routinely benchmarking curricular content against business needs, and consideration of the factors contributing to the variation in standards against which course relevancy is measured.

**Business School Rankings.** This study tends to support the findings of Segev, Raveh, and Farjoun (1999) that extracurricular factors drive the business school rankings and the school selection process. Of those schools listed by the popular Business Week school rankings as being among the top U.S. business schools for Marketing only the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School appears on the list of schools offering 4-5 courses in common with the Employer Needs List. While schools cannot be faulted for providing a package of attributes to attract students these results suggest that employers, accrediting bodies, and students may hold schools to conflicting standards.

**Benchmarking.** While total quality management practices are important, selective use of some tools over others may not provide the necessary results. For instance, benchmarking the course listing of other schools, a practice encouraged by the AACSB and discussed earlier in this study, yielded a course list that was very different than that revealed in the survey (see Table 2). This indicates that while benchmarking may be useful to uncover best practices in school administration, it is probably not as useful to assess curriculum relevancy.

**TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF TOP FIVE COURSES  
OFFERED AND REQUESTED**

Rank	Population	
	Schools	BMA marketers
1	Marketing Research	Business-Business
2	Consumer Behavior	Marketing Strategy
3	Marketing Mgmt	Advertising
4	Advertising	Market Research
5	Marketing Strategy	Electronic Marketing

Note: Courses ranked by frequency of selection.

**Common courses.** The survey data did reveal some differences in course selection between consumers and B-to-B marketers as well as between this study and Ellen and Pilling (2002). However, three courses were common to all groups examined. Those courses were Marketing Strategy, Advertising, and Marketing Research. This was true of both consumer and B-to-B marketers in the Ellen and Pilling study as well. Less than half or 31% of AACSB accredited schools provided this combination of courses. These results suggest that perhaps a common core of marketing courses is needed, with electives offered to assist in tailoring programs to more individual needs of both students and the businesses seeking to employ more specialized students.

**Variation in need by stakeholder.** Arguably, when seeking business input into the outcomes development process, business managers, that is CEO, Vice President or Directors, would be the most logical source of information about MBA performance or required skills. Background studies examined reflect this conclusion. The input of managers responsible for working with employees who are MBA prepared may vary from those who actually recruit, interview and ultimately hire these same employees. More research could be done comparing the specific view of these particular stakeholders.

## LIMITATIONS

**Population selected.** The fact that in this study 78% of B-to-B marketers selected the B-to-B marketing course more often than any other course on the list of marketing offerings suggests that the type of customer the business serves, that is consumer versus B-to-B, may impact course selection and result in a different needs list. For this reason, an examination of consumer marketers' course preferences would be valuable to compare with the data collected in this study. The results of such a comparison would allow one to determine if different curricula are required for consumer marketers versus B-to-B marketers.

**Number of courses examined.** The average number of marketing courses offered in MBA programs with an emphasis in marketing was 6.77. When six rather than five courses were examined, no differences were revealed between the course selections of consumer versus B-to-B marketers. This finding is consistent with Ellen and Pilling (2002). In that number of courses selected for comparison was somewhat arbitrarily chosen, it may be useful to examine more than five courses in future studies.

**Using the course bulletin.** Seminar courses and other such specialized courses offered at many schools are designed to bring dynamic and important business issues to the classroom. The course bulletin doesn't always reflect the content of these special courses, and hence, examining the bulletins only may not give the complete picture of a program's content and may underestimate the relevancy of the actual coursework.

## CONCLUSION

The pace at which the business environment evolves requires that educational systems to prepare students for employment in business be relevant and dynamic. Business schools must be able to adapt readily and consistently to these changes in order to provide

relevant curricula. This article illustrates the need for and importance of developing methods and modalities that demonstrate continual efforts to align business school curriculum with the changing needs of the business environment.

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