

Why students should study marketing

by **Herbert Rotfeld**

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Oh my God, marketing professors are acting like professors.

They give lectures and study business activities instead of practicing them. When not in the classroom, they read books and papers and spend time writing. They call it research, but we know what it really is. They are thinking.

To some marketing professionals, these professors are wasting the students' time with teaching that gets in the way of training for that first marketing job. Posted on an Internet bulletin board for professionals and educators was the complaint, "I ain't got no idea why they require English and spelling in [marketing classes] since some jobs don't require people to do any writing."

Sarcasm aside, marketing is an area of study for a four-year college education. And for the marketing business, a facile and educated mind is more important than a head full of business terms that might be archaic by graduation time.

Marketing was an extremely popular area of study, but it seems to be losing its following. At many universities during the 1980s, student requests for undergraduate marketing courses grossly exceeded class space. But as university enrollments drop, many marketing departments report a disproportionate loss of students.

For most students, the choice of courses or an academic major is a process of elimination. The process might not be conscious, and it is rarely overt, but it exists. Since students believe that their job options are dictated by their transcripts, most liberal arts are not considered unless the student's plans include post-graduate study. Science is eliminated unless a strong interest was engendered in high school. Engineering programs require extensive math and calculus, another high school proficiency which U.S. schools do so poorly to encourage.

Granted, these are generalizations, not universals, but most students see their future careers as "in business," and they fervently be-

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lieve that a career in business requires studying business in college. And from there, they choose majors and courses they think will help them get jobs.

Rumors of job placement might play a role. If students hear that most graduates get jobs in sales, the personal selling courses quickly become popular. Other students relate that they choose their academic majors because they sound like interesting jobs.

Then why have some business schools been losing students? Why are the numbers of marketing majors in decline? If anything, the search for job certification is stronger than ever.

The answer is simple. Across every campus, other departments and colleges also now claim to provide job training.

Sociology departments "train" criminologists. English faculty run degree programs in business and technical writing or book editing. Other nonbusiness faculty train students in hotel management, restaurant service, fashion merchandising, and commercial design, to name a few. They also offer business minors so liberal arts majors feel they are preparing for jobs.

Of course, like marketing, most of these new "professional education" areas are not closed-shop guilds where people lacking certain degrees are barred from jobs. Graduates of marketing, English, economics, public relations, or history who lack experience in those areas are qualified for the same jobs. While university placement records are rarely, if ever, discussed, many faculty members know that over half of all college graduates enter careers unrelated to their majors.

Marketing departments could structure a relationship with businesses akin to that enjoyed by college football and the NFL. Students would enter college with hopes of high-paying jobs and spend four years forsaking all other facets of educational value as they maximize job training. Then the businesses could run a draft and choose to hire one or two students from the major, allowing the rest to decline into ob-

scurity.

This would mean that marketing professors could be training officers, not scholars. Doctorates would be irrelevant; only successful business practitioners need apply for academic jobs.

But there is a danger in this strategy. Since no university would tolerate the football model, economic problems might limit the ability of the marketing-training schools to find jobs for any graduates. It has not happened to any marketing program yet, but some schools' professional programs have been cut or eliminated because of poor placement rates. At one university, since the degree program claimed to train future journalists but could only place one-quarter of graduates in journalism jobs, the program was deleted.

More important, supplanting education with job training could hurt businesses in the long run. Marketing is not a mechanized job, with cookbooks being used to plug in daily tasks. Employees need creativity, innovation, and insight. In journalism, where education has long been seen as reporter training, many modern reporters know the mechanics of writing a story but are ignorant of what they write. They see journalism as a mechanism, a form. If this happened in marketing research, graduates would see work as generating data piles without understanding the need for interpretation. Sales management would degenerate into writing the perfect sales script.

Faculty tell new law students, "We are not here to teach the law. We teach you how to analyze problems as lawyers." The best law professors might have been successful as lawyers, but they are respected on campus as scholars and in the legal profession for their insight and analysis of legal issues.

So instead of job training, marketing departments should do more to join the greater academic community. When marketing enrollments soared, courses were closed to nonmajors. Colleges of business have stood as islands, outside the rest of the university community. And that has been our loss.

So many people know so little about what marketing is (and is not). Marketing courses can be an integral part of any student's education. No matter what the major, no matter what the future job, understanding marketing practices and their role in a modern economy can be useful for any educated person.

Marketing scholars, scholarship, and a variety of courses could become parts of all types of university programs, both those claiming a professional education and those with more academic goals. As an academic discipline, marketing can be respected as an integral part of any campus, possibly even tied to a predominantly liberal arts core curriculum.

But first, marketing educators must acknowledge that they are professors. The courses are credit toward an education degree. Let business run the short-run job training as baseball runs its own farm leagues. Let universities concentrate on turning out people who can think. ■