

# An Evaluation of the Marketing Curriculum Based on Where the Arrows Land

*Victor J. Massad, massad@kutztown.edu*

*Feisal Murshed, murshed@kutztown.edu*

## Abstract

This paper seeks to evaluate the relevance of the marketing curriculum by analyzing the career outcomes of students after they graduate. Examining the job titles, firms and industries of marketing graduates can yield important information to educators as to whether the information and skills taught at the undergraduate level match the information and skills needed in the workplace. A study of 219 graduates of a marketing program at a Pennsylvania state university finds that students end up in a wide variety of jobs, working for mostly small and medium sized enterprises, in industries that are slightly weighted toward the business-to-business domain.

## Introduction

Because Marketing is a vocation-oriented degree, whether undergraduate business students choose to study marketing over all the possible majors from which they may choose is largely dependent on its perception as a degree that has value in the employment market. It is conjectured that very few students choose to study marketing out of passion for the subject matter. If employers began to devalue marketing education as a precursor to employment in marketing-related fields, then interest in the discipline as a field of study would be expected to decline rapidly, and marketing educators would find themselves on the job market with few skills to leverage.

As will be revealed in the subsequent literature review, the consensus among marketing researchers is that marketing as an academic subject is falling short in terms of its ability to deliver to employers students who are better prepared for workplace success compared to students who study other subjects. However, there is wide disagreement as to exactly what the problems are, and even less agreement on the proper course of action to take to solve them. It seems to many of us who have been at this for many years that students seem less prepared than ever in terms of their writing skills, analytical abilities, motivation and work-ethics.

One of the authors of this paper recently attended a “pedagogical seminar” in which the first slide of the leader’s Power Point presentation had the headline “We Now Know What Works.”

The author saw these words, correctly assumed they meant that the body of work in pedagogy has now yielded the educational magic pill (teamwork and collaboration, predictably) that will yield the long-sought outcomes educators have longed for. His visceral response was to raise his hand and ask the obvious question: If collaborative learning is what works, and we have been doing it now for at least 25 years, why do the deficiencies we see in our students seem to be greater than ever?

This is not to say the pedagogical literature is necessarily wrong. Rather, it is to say that it is clearly biased toward collective rather than individual learning, and that it has become an echo chamber in which everyone is rewarded for coming to the same conclusions. Thus, it is failing to adequately deliver solutions that will close the gap between what students are learning in colleges and universities and what employers expect from them. Under this backdrop, the present research seeks to provide some new insights that will help educators close the gap by taking a look at what actually happens to the arrows we shoot into the air.

We are going to take a look at where they land.

## Literature Review

The subject of “graduate employability” and whether university programs are adequately preparing students for life-long careers in fields they will find rewarding and satisfying has long been a subject of academic research. These studies tend to look at the subject more broadly than marketing faculty might, but they do have value in that there have been many theoretical frameworks developed that prescribe how to better prepare students for the workplace. An early paradigm was introduced by Cotton (1993) who identified a collection of basic, higher order and effective employability skills required by employers. Cotton’s model categorized employability skills into three types: basic skills, higher order thinking skills, affective skills and traits. Subsequent researchers criticized Cotton’s model as somewhat deficient because it failed to consider attitudinal attributes such as motivation and discipline (see for example Knight & York 2004).

Cotton’s original framework spawned a number of subsequent models including the USEM Model, which is an acronym for Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition (Pool & Sewell 2007) and the CareerEDGE model which combines five lower order factors, (career development learning, experience, degree subject knowledge understanding and skills, generic skills, and emotional intelligence) and socio/psychological factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence (Pool et al 2014). A final student employability model worth mentioning is the Journey of Employment Model (Jet) proposed by Copps & Plimmer

(2013). The Jet model proposes that other models are too focused on short-term employment instead of long-term sustained employability, which includes quality of work and job satisfaction.

There are a number of previous research papers that focus specifically on marketing student employability. Wellman (2010) conducted a meta analysis on the employer expectations for marketing graduates in the United Kingdom. His study found that, among employers, experience was somewhat more important than education as less than half of employers of marketing graduates required a college degree. Also, only about 25 percent of employers specifically required a degree in marketing, suggesting that training in the discipline is not considered critical to success in the marketing field. Among the most important competencies sought by employers were: communications, interpersonal relationships, information and communications technology, planning, self-management, decision making and problem solving. The most important personal traits sought by UK marketing employers were: creativity, responsibility, initiative, determination and confidence.

In a recent study, Ramos et al (2018) documented a somewhat more favorable view for marketing as they found no significant difference between the expectations of marketing undergraduate students and the expectations of employers in terms of what is needed to properly prepare for an entry-level marketing-related job. Students and employers answered nearly identically when asked scale questions as the importance of (1) learning and innovation skills (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration); (2) technology skills (information literacy, media literacy); and (3) life and career skills (flexibility, initiative, social skills, productivity, leadership). However, the fact that students and employers agree on what skills are necessary and important for a successful marketing career does not necessarily mean that there would be broad agreement as to whether students were adequately prepared in each of the categories studied.

Down under, Australian researchers McArthur et al (2017) looked at marketing recruitment advertisements to ascertain what attributes were most demanded by employers. They concluded that motivation, time management, communication skills, and digital marketing experience were the most sought after attributes by employers. They suggested there is a “mooted gap” between the expectations of academics and those of employers because few academics would place motivation and time management at the top of their list of learning objectives they wish to instill in students.

Anderson & Lees (2017) discuss the “employability challenge” in academia. They point out that many marketing professors do not consider it their role to instill generic workplace skills or attributes. Instead, they view the discipline as a science or social science that contributes a valuable body of knowledge to the magma of information available in the scientific literature. If

this information has real-world applications, so much the better, but that should not be the main thrust of what it means to be a marketing academic. Their research proposes that through innovative teaching practice, students can be taught the subject matter of marketing while at the same time acquiring the skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

A study that is of particular relevance to the present research is that of Cheng et al (2016). Their research found that a large number of marketing graduates go to work for small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs). However, the marketing curriculum -- which focuses on big corporate decision-making such as strategic planning -- fails to adequately prepare students for the kind of decision-making that must be done by managers of smaller enterprises. The paper proposes that the marketing curriculum at universities shift from one that is focused on theory and models that best serve large corporations to one that is focused on problem solving, communication, leadership, networking and teamwork. In doing so, it not only adds to extant literature but also addresses a substantive issue from the perspective of the potential employers.

To date, there is no published study that utilizes archival data about students after they graduate in order to evaluate whether their job responsibilities match the set of information and skills they learned as undergraduate students.

## The Study

A dataset of 219 observations with four variables per observation was created by examining the Linked-In profiles of former marketing students of a marketing professor. The students were all graduates from an AACSB-accredited business program at a state system university in eastern Pennsylvania. The university is in a rural area located between the cities of Reading and Allentown. It is a regional school which serves students who come mostly from within a 100-mile radius, which includes the Philadelphia metropolitan statistical area. Following are descriptions of each of the variables collected. All of the students chosen for the study were degreed and employed. Former students who were job-seeking or not yet graduated were not considered for the study.

<b>Frequencies of Words in First Word of Job Title</b>		
<i>WORD</i>	<i>NUMBER</i>	<i>FREQUENCY PCT</i>
Sales	24	11.0
Marketing	19	8.7
Account	13	5.9
Assistant	10	4.6
Operations	8	3.7
Project	7	3.2
Other	138	63.0

*Table 1*

*First Name In Job Title.*

The job titles of the 219 were observed, and in cases in which there were at least two words to the title, the first word was noted. There were 22 cases in which the job title had a single word. In those cases the cell in the spreadsheet was left blank. There were 15 cases in which the job title had three words. In those cases the researcher used discretion as to which word to place into this category. As an example, if the job title was “Director of Marketing” then the title was changed to “Marketing Director” and the word “Marketing” was placed into this column. As another example, if the title was “Assistant to the Director of Client Relations” then the title was changed to “Assistant Director” and the word “Assistant” was placed into the column. The purpose was to have a list of “qualifiers” which would indicate the level in company hierarchy, or area of expertise of each graduate.

Table 1 summarizes the number of responses and percentage of frequency for the most common terms used in the first word of job title.

**Frequencies of Words in Second Word of Job Title**

<i>WORD</i>	<i>NUMBER</i>	<i>FREQUENCY PCT</i>
Manager	50	22.8
Specialist	20	9.1
Coordinator	19	8.7
Representative	13	5.9
Analyst	12	5.5
Associate	11	5.0
Consultant	11	5.0
Executive	10	4.6
Other	73	33.3

Table 2

*Last Name In Job Title.*

The job titles of the 219 were observed, and in cases in which there was one or more words to the title, the last word was noted. There were a few cases in which the job title was changed to better reflect the type of job a graduate held. Using an example from the previous variable, if the title was “Assistant to the Director of Client Relations” then the title was changed to “Assistant Director” and the word “Director” was placed into the column. The purpose was to have a list of words which would describe the level of responsibility of each graduate.

Table 2 summarizes the number of responses and percentage of frequency for the most common terms used in the first word of job title.

### *Employer.*

The name of the graduate's employer was noted and placed in this column. In the 19 cases in which no employer was noted, the column was left blank. There were seven (3.5 percent of the cases with observations) profiles that showed the graduate to be self-employed. There were only three cases in which more than one student was employed by the same employer. For that reason there is no summary table for this variable. The three companies that did have duplicates included a personnel accounting service that recruits for salespeople heavily at the university (4 students), a large local manufacturer (3 students), a television home shopping network based in this region (2 students) and a large, well-known insurance company (2 students). There were no other duplicates.

The vast majority of the companies were regional small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in a variety of industries.

### *Industry.*

Each of the companies was evaluated and classified into industries based on the firm description found on the firm's website. The industries chosen were:

**Business Services.** This category included any company that sold services ranging from software solutions, technical support, consultancy services to marketing/advertising within the business-to-business domain.

**Consumer Services.** This category included any company that sold services ranging from professional sports, hospitality, gambling and cellular phone services within the business-to-consumer domain.

**Finance and Insurance.** This category included banks, insurance companies, investment management firms, mortgage companies and lenders of all types, including three cases in which the students were employed by firms that specialize in refinancing student debt.

**Health Care.** This category included pharmaceutical companies, hospitals and health insurance providers.

**Manufacturing and Wholesaling.** This category included companies that manufacture both consumer and upstream goods, wholesalers and businesses involved in supply chain logistics.

**Media.** This category included newspapers, radio stations, television stations and digital content providers. Firms that offered media buying services or media content were placed in the Business Services category.

**Retail.** This category included any firm that offered goods directly to consumers, whether in-person or online.

The majority of the sample (67 percent) was employed in one of these industries, as noted in Table 3. Other industries that were observed included Defense (3 graduates), Education (1 graduate), Government (3 graduates) and Transportation (2 graduates).

## Limitations

This study is limited to 219 former students from one professor at one state university. The ability to generalize the findings is therefore limited. There is reason to believe that the findings may differ based on the nature of the institution of higher learning, region, college or university size, or professor. The authors intend to broaden the study to include many more students, from many more professors, varying institutions, and more variables.

Additional data collection would help to increase the external validity of our findings. As the professors are considered major change agents, it might also be fruitful to do a survey based on marketing professors. Also, a survey based on employers would also provide more nuanced understanding.

Nothing in this study accounts for the impact of online marketing classes, which have become more popular. Future studies could explore the whether learning objectives related to career outcomes might be compromised by online versus traditional learning.

**Industry Frequencies**

<i>INDUSTRY</i>	<i>NUMBER</i>	<i>FREQUENCY PCT</i>
Business Services	56	25.6
Finance/Insurance	36	16.4
Manufacturing/Wholesaling	24	11
Retail	24	11
Health Care	15	6.8
Consumer Services	11	5.0
Media	9	4.1
Other	44	20

*Table 3*

## Conclusion

The key purpose of this research is to provide insights into how Universities are preparing the students for the job market. Specifically, we argue that marketing curriculum's viability in this day and age will be dependent upon its ability to stay in tune with the job market in terms of developing the functional skills students will need in the workplace. As such, we recommend an adjustment of the marketing curriculum and content within individual classes based on our

understanding of the employment opportunities that exist. Marketing as a functional discipline is always evolving and there are continually new challenges to address; therefore, the marketing curriculum should focus on developing skills that will maximize the students' potential for future success.

The curriculum for the marketing program used in this study is typical of that which might be found in a state university. Students are required to take a business core, which includes two basic accounting courses, a management information course, business law, business statistics, an international elective, principles of finance, principles of management, and principles of marketing. Within the major, students are required to take three courses: Consumer Behavior, Marketing Research and Marketing Management; they also must choose three marketing electives which include Advertising Management, Media Management, E-Commerce, Personal Selling, Business Logistics and Marketing Ethics.

Comparing the curriculum to the career outcomes, it appears there is a need to realign the curriculum to better prepare students for the careers they are most likely to enter into. Given that only 16 percent of the students entered consumer-related fields, whereas 37 percent entered into business-to-business fields, it may make more sense to move Consumer Behavior into the elective category and elevate Personal Selling or Supply Chain Management into the required category. Also, given the low number of analysts, specialists and consultants, Marketing Research seems to be of limited value in comparison to Marketing Management. Perhaps it would be better to require Supply Chain Management, Personal Selling and Marketing Management, and move Marketing Research and Consumer Behavior to electives. While some students did end up in advertising-related fields, it was not sufficient to justify two separate courses devoted to the subject. Advertising Management and Media Management should be combined into a single course.

Marketing remains a popular major and marketing related occupations are expected to experience continual growth. The enormous growth of social media and digital technology have also fueled marketing analytics related jobs across a wide variety of industries, within both the public and private sectors. One estimate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) showed that there are approximately 250K jobs associated with advertising, promotion, and marketing with an expected growth rate of 10 percent. The question is whether the current marketing paradigm, with its focus on the 4 Ps and traditional methodologies for targeting markets, is relevant in the face of a digitalized universe in which products, pricing and distribution can be customized to each consumer, and promotion can be accomplished based on a consumer's online behavior profile as opposed to demographics or attitudes.

Another conflict between the curriculum and actual career outcomes is in the fact that the vast majority of students go to work for SMEs. Since smaller firms are likely to have less need for



strategic thinking and more need for practical skills, it implies a need to shift the focus away from “big picture” training in marketing strategy toward more practical knowledge about things like website building software, or how to use Google Analytics. On the other hand, the fact that students go into such varied fields suggests that “big picture” thinking may be all that we can reasonably teach them, and that the specialized knowledge will have to come from the eventual employer. Suffice to say that this is a conversation that needs to be opened.

Given the wide variety of occupations and industries represented in the data, it presents a challenge for educators to revamp their curricula in a way that will be more relevant to students. More emphasis on entrepreneurship may help students to forge their own paths rather than depending on a conventional approach. Consider a recent marketing associate: he or she may be called upon to perform a number of tasks ranging from updating a website, developing a video for a Kickstarter campaign, navigating the waters of SEO (Search Engine Optimization)/SEM (Search Engine Marketing), designing marketing promotional messages, calling on business clients and potential clients, analyzing information and writing reports, and presenting information to a group. Prioritizing what information and skills are most and least important is a daunting task, but imperative for various university stakeholders: students, employers, professors, administrators, and advisory boards.

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*Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:* This paper seeks to evaluate the relevance of the marketing curriculum by analyzing the career outcomes of students after they graduate. Examining the job titles, firms and industries of marketing graduates can yield important information to educators as to whether the information and skills taught at the undergraduate level match the information and skills needed in the workplace. A study of 219 graduates of a marketing program at a Pennsylvania state university finds that students end up in a wide variety of jobs, working for mostly small and medium sized enterprises, in industries that are slightly weighted toward the business-to-business domain.

*Author Information:*

Victor J. Massad, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

Feisal Murshed, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

*Track:* Education/Experiential Learning

*ID#:* 1453