Do We Prepare Our Students Well for the Job Markets?

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Introduction

When college tuition and fees keep increasing and less scholarship money is available, students and their parents may have to make a critical decision on what to study at college. Recent data showed that student enrollments at the U.S. Agricultural Colleges are decreasing. One may not know for sure the answer of such a negative trend until he or she examines the causes. However, one thing is certain in that low enrollment can be interpreted as less demand on the services being offered. Low demand can also be seen as failures from service providers to accommodate markets' or students' or society's expectations and needs. Therefore, students as consumers' are shifting their preference from College of Agriculture to something else, such as Economics, Business Administration, Nursing or even Hotel and Restaurant Management which showed a tremendous positive growth in recent years. One might asked what needs to be done to overcome such a negative trend?

When the enrollments were down as shown in recent years, something must have gone wrong. Therefore, every one who is involved in the system needs to find out what solutions are viable so that the problem can be minimized. This objective can be achieved by asking the students, hiring managers, human resource managers of agribusiness companies on what their expectations are on college graduates with agricultural economic or agribusiness major. Perhaps one of the most important reason for the College of Agriculture to offer education services to the public is to prepare its graduates such that they are prepared to carry out tasks within their expertise.

In a practical sense, how can the educational institution prepare their students better for the job market to fulfill the needs of companies? Jobs that require agribusiness

training are available and outnumber the ability of the Department of Agricultural Economics or Agribusiness can supply. Agribusiness is a big business in the US and a recent data showed that it was a $1,995.00 billion dollar industry in 2004.   One might asked oneself where the industry gets all the human resources to run the business? If the industry hires students that have a degree in Agribusiness, it surely will absorb all the graduates that have Agribusiness or Agricultural Economics background.   This situation will certainly attract prospective students to enroll in the Agribusiness or Agricultural Economics. But with the recent trend of enrollments, it apparently is not the case. One can ask several "why questions" on the situation. These types of questions have been asked frequently in the past, but slow improvements were seen.

Objectives:

The objective of this study is to examine what set of knowledge or trainings that will help students with agribusiness major to compete for a job in the market. What kind of job the College, Department or the school is preparing their students for in the real world? Though these questions are important but to find the answers are not always easy. The only way to know what the problems are and to come out with better explanations is to ask the students themselves or the hiring managers so that the school administrators are able to revise or revitalize their programs or courses in order to meet the job requirements. Knowing what the job requirements are will certainly help the institution to improve, eliminate or add courses that will help preparing students to get their dream jobs. Ignoring external consumers' or employers' expectations and needs will prove to be expensive in terms of students' enrollments.

Data and Methods:

Data were collected from surveys, interviews, review of documents and observations. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in this study. The use of qualitative approaches enables one to analyze the problems from different perspective. These perspectives are:

1.   Students' perspective.

2.   Administrators' point of view.

3.   Employers' point of view and

4.   Comparing what happens across countries.

Students are the most important sources to find out the answer of the research questions. They are the one who experiencing all the process. However, one also needs to be aware of externalities which cause a particular group of students graduated with less preparation. There are two types of students who are attending a college. The first group consists of students who really know what they want and know how attending college can help them to achieve their goals. Though the classes are challenging, these students tend to take courses which will help them to achieve their goals. They are also more focus not only on their classes, but also to their whole education process. On the other hand, the second group of students may not know for sure why they are even attending college. In many occasions one might heard the following conversation "my parents or mom or dad make me to go to college". As one might expect, this type of students are less focus and less motivated on their classes. Therefore, there is a good chance that these students ended up taking minimum requirements to get through college. As a consequence, these students may have a difficult time to find the job they are

looking for after graduation. On the other hand, the first group of students will be in a better position because they took classes which will support them in the job market.

From the employer point of view, the hiring of a perspective employee can be affected by many factors such as the net working (buddy system), the skills, the character and the trainable philosophy. In several occasion talking with recent alumni, several students asked the following question "how did you get selected for your current job"? The answer one might encounter is that because he or she knows somebody in the company or because the hiring manager is his high school buddy. Less appreciation is given by these students on their college classes that they have taken or the trainings or skills that have been taught at the school. The answer will be different if the same questions were asked to students who are under the first category. They will have more positive answers on how important the courses, classes and various trainings that they have been exposed during their college years. A person who was hired because of the buddy system will conclude that classes and college preparation have nothing to do with his success of getting a job.

The administrator will be judged on the numbers. Basically, there are several factors that the school administrators are looking for and a couple of these factors are the number of student enrollments and graduation rates. The higher the rate of graduation the better it will look on the paper. The same situation will also true of increasing enrolments which mean a success story. Quality may not be the top considered factor that the administrator will be looking at.   As a result of this unfortunate situation, administrators might be less aware on the life or readiness of their graduates once the students left the school. When people are not judged on certain results, they will be less

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compelled to get things done properly. With the routines that most faculty have, there will be less time available to think what kind of attributes that their graduates need to have to satisfy the job requirements. A constant evaluation of the course contents and what required in the job market are two essential elements that administrators, teaching faculty and the College can prepare their graduates to satisfy the job requirements. However, as the world is so dynamic, constant changes or "improvements" will also cause a lot of problems for the students, faculty and administrators as well. A constant change challenges the administrators, faculty and the students in many ways. For example, a constant change means more administrative works that need to be done by the administration; course revisions for the instructor mean more time needed to prepare for classes. A new course might also cause anxiety among students because they may not be familiar with some of the materials.

From a larger point of view, one notices that the majority of students may have lack of training in basic sciences, math or computer technologies. While other countries in the Asian region prepare their students equally well in those mentioned areas, the US has experienced a declining students' interest in the areas of math and science. The decreasing interest in both math and science will affect directly the student's preparedness to take classes that require only a simple of math thinking. As a result, most colleges in the US are experiencing a fundamental change. Grade inflation becomes a normal way of fulfilling the needs of school administrators for higher graduate rates. Instructors are cutting back the amount of materials being discussed in class and more extra credits outside the ordinary exam scores are given to the student to improve their grade. A take- home or open-book exams are more common these days in many colleges

in the country. A normal curve is abuse badly to "make" the instructor achievements look better and to make the students' evaluations look "above the college or the departmental average". When this situation will end or is there any point in the future where policy makers can reverse this trend to the other way?

Having said all of these unfortunate developments, one might ask what will be the best way to approach the problem so that she or he can come out with the solutions or at least a better explanation on the whole situation? This study proposes both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to address the issues. The qualitative approaches such as interviews, observation, and review of documents are the most important research instruments that one could apply to address the research questions. The quantitative part of the study can be conducted based on gathered data through surveys or questionnaires. The following variables were used in the surveys.

SATIS = How satisfy the students are on the level of training they experienced.
CLASHELP = How helpful the Agriculture classes are to prepare them for the job.
GENED = How useful their general classes are for their future career.
PREPARING = How good the department has prepared them for the job market.
RELEVANT = How relevant all classes that they took.
MINOR = How relevant classes in their minor are.
FIT = How the curricula fit students' interest.
SKILL = How the curricula have helped training the students.
YEARINS = Years in school.
GENDER = Respondent's gender.
LIVE = Where the students are living, on or out campus.
MARRY = Are the students married.
MAJOR = What are they major in.

Results and Discussion:

Forty four MTSU students were surveyed and fifteen students were interviewed to collect information whether they are satisfied with classes that they took during the college years. Three hiring managers were also interviewed. Including in the student

group who were surveyed were graduating seniors and junior students. Those who were interviewed are only graduating seniors. The results showed that most of the newly graduated seniors are happy with classes that they have taken in both their major and minor. But they also expressed concerned that the general courses have less relevant with their current job. The result of the interview is predictable. Interviews were also conducted to several hiring managers. Since the hiring policies are different from one company to the other, to find the common answer will be a challenge. One of the manager said their company's policy is to recruit prospective employees based on the applicants' character—meaning less stressing on the GPA and what classes that a student has taken. In other words, character is an important attribute. But, one might see that a prospective employee will not too convinced if a lot of bad grades showed in a student's transcripts either. Other hiring managers will look thing differently such as experience outside the class room as an important additional factor beside the class works. This study found a common theme in that a company will train the new employees for the position they have applied.

Data from the surveys were estimated to understand what the alumni, both current and graduating seniors' opinion on the school curricula. Most respondents think that both their agriculture and classes in their minor were relevant and help accomplishing their tasks in the work place. This finding is very encouraging and is consistent with the qualitative findings through interviews. More complete results can be found in Appendix 1 of this paper. The choices that the respondents need to choose from the surveys are: strongly disagree (coded as 1); disagree (coded as 2); agree (coded as 3) and strongly agree (coded as 4). This study also compared the satisfaction level based on

gender and years in school. The results showed there is no statistical evidence to support the level of satisfactions related to gender. But, when comparing the satisfaction level and majors, this study found that variable SKILL is significantly different across majors. However, one needs to be careful in reading the results of this study in that the sample size is too small to make more general inferences.

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Appendix 1 – Results of Curricula Study

SATIS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	37	84.1	84.1	84.1
	4	7	15.9	15.9	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

CLASHELP

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1	2.3	2.3	2.3
	2	2	4.5	4.5	6.8
	3	29	65.9	65.9	72.7
	4	12	27.3	27.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

GENED

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	2	4.5	4.5	4.5
	2	11	25.0	25.0	29.5
	3	30	68.2	68.2	97.7
	4	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

PREPARING

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	5	11.4	11.4	11.4
	3	39	88.6	88.6	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

RELEVANT

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	3	6.8	6.8	6.8
	2	27	61.4	61.4	68.2
	3	12	27.3	27.3	95.5
	4	2	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

MINOR

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1	2.3	2.3	2.3
	2	11	25.0	25.0	27.3
	3	28	63.6	63.6	90.9
	4	4	9.1	9.1	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

FIT

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	3	6.8	6.8	6.8
	3	39	88.6	88.6	95.5
	4	2	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

SKILL

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1	2.3	2.3	2.3
	2	1	2.3	2.3	4.5
	3	41	93.2	93.2	97.7
	4	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

YEARINS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	2	4.5	4.5	4.5
	2	4	9.1	9.1	13.6
	3	13	29.5	29.5	43.2
	4	25	56.8	56.8	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	