

Student Satisfaction and Perceptions Of Academic Program Attributes

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Introduction

As part of a university-wide rebranding initiative at a large public Midwestern institution, questions have arisen at both the college and department levels regarding how to best position various academic programs to mesh with and support the organization's overall mission. As a branding issue, our department of marketing has taken a particular interest in this review. Central issues concern both assessing student satisfaction and identifying differentiating attributes comprising our college and marketing department's brand image. This study was undertaken to address several objectives. While an organization's brand is projected externally to its various stakeholders, brand image starts internally from within (Peters and Willis 2009; Keller and Webster 2009). The study thus explores both perceived cross-college and department-level reported student satisfaction. Further, students' perceptions of selected program attributes associated with their major programs are examined to identify strengths and weakness. Of particular interest was an investigation of program characteristics and satisfaction levels both across colleges and across major programs within our college of business.

Method

A self-administered online questionnaire was developed to assess students' satisfaction levels associated with their major programs of study and to explore their perceptions regarding how their respective major programs compared on a list of potentially differentiating attributes. Satisfaction was operationalized as a single item measure using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from -3="Extremely Dissatisfied" to +3="Extremely Satisfied".

Two focus group sessions involving undergraduate students were held to identify academic program attributes that participants perceived as differentiating various major

programs across the university and within the college of business. The focus group sessions yielded a list of twenty program attributes covering a range of issues relating to program content, instruction, career relevance, student engagement opportunities, etc. Several items taken from the academic counseling literature (Spanierman, et al 2013; Tovar and Simon 2010; The Ohio State University Center for the Study of Student Life 2015) were additionally included to address students' sense of belongingness, a characteristic known to be related to academic success and retention. Respondents were asked to rate their major program of study on each of these twenty attributes using a 5-point Likert agreement/disagreement scale. (The complete list of these program attributes is found in Table 3.)

The questionnaire was distributed during the 2016 summer term via email invitation to all majors within the college of business and all marketing minors, the vast majority of whom carry non-business majors. The survey was open for a two-week period involving one midpoint email reminder yielding a sample of 159 respondents. Despite a gift card incentive, a modest response rate (8 percent) was attributed to the summer term timing of the survey. A profile of the sample is included in Table 1. As noted, respondents were predominantly upper level, full-time business students carrying a range of majors within the college of business. The majority of students reported to have selected their major program during their freshman year of study, and more than half reported not to have changed their major program during their academic experiences.

Table 1: Sample Profile (N=159)

College	n	Class	n	Major Program	n	Enrollment	n
Business	124	Freshman	2	Marketing	44	Full-Time	155
Other	35	Sophomore	12	Other Business	80	Part-Time	4
	159	Junior	47	All Others	35		159
		Senior	98		159		
			159				

GPA	n	Major Declared	n	Times Major Changed	n	Take Classes	n
3.5 – 4.0	61	Freshman	80	0	85	All In Class	66
3.0 – 3.4	62	Sophomore	54	1	49	Most In Class	87
2.5 – 2.9	33	Junior	20	2+ Times	25	Most Online	6
2.0 – 2.4	2	Senior	5		159		159
Below 2.0	1		159				
	159						

Reported Satisfaction

Students' reported academic program satisfaction levels were compared both between the college of business and other non-business colleges and also between the marketing and non-marketing majors within the college of business. A summary is shown in Table 2. Mean reported satisfaction between students in the college of business and those in non-business colleges was not significantly different ($p=.216$). Within the college of business, however, reported satisfaction of students enrolled in the marketing program was found to exceed mean satisfaction reported by other business program majors, marginally significant at $p=.063$.

**Table 2: Student Satisfaction Ratings*
Across Colleges & Business Majors**

Colleges	n	Mean Satisfaction Score	t	df	Significance
College of Business	124	1.84	1.241	157	p=.216
All Others	35	2.06			
	159	1.89			

Majors Within College of Business	n	Mean Satisfaction Score	t	df	Significance
Marketing	44	2.05	1.879	122	p=.063
All Other Majors	80	1.73			
	124	1.84			

*7-pt Likert scale ranging from -3="Extremely Dissatisfied" to +3="Extremely Satisfied"

Program Attribute Differences

Respondents' ratings of their major academic programs on the individual program attributes were compared between students enrolled in the college of business and non-business colleges and also between marketing and non-marketing majors within the college of business. These results are included in Table 3.

In comparing perceived attribute differences between the business school and the other colleges, the mean of seven of the twenty attributes showed statistically significant variation. Students reported significantly higher agreement that the college of business exhibited better placement, competitive job market opportunities, and entrepreneurial

orientation than other colleges within the university. In contrast to these other college units, however, the college of business fared significantly lower on attributes relating to sense of community among classmates, excitement, pride, and opportunities to work collaboratively with faculty.

In a narrower comparison of students' perceptions strictly within the college of business, marketing majors reported their major to offer significantly lower performance in providing a competitive job market advantage in contrast to the advantage provided by other business majors. In contrast, however, marketing majors indicated significantly stronger agreement that the marketing program offered superior team building skill development and more opportunities to participate in immersive, experiential learning than other business majors within the college.

Table 3: Academic Program Attribute Mean Ratings* Between Colleges and Majors

My major program.....	Between Colleges			Between Business Majors		
	Business	Others	Sig? **	Marketing	Others	Sig? **
Offers good placement opportunities	.81	.20	Yes	.73	.86	-
Offers many opportunities for off-campus internships	.83	.46	-	.86	.81	-
Offers practitioner networking opportunities	.85	.51	-	.91	.83	-
Gives me competitive advantage in job market	.82	.40	Yes	.52	.99	Yes
Content fits my career interests	1.32	1.26	-	1.16	1.41	-
Offers good selection of courses	.94	.94	-	.86	.99	-
Provides knowledge I will need for success in career	1.18	1.03	-	1.25	1.14	-
Stimulates entrepreneurial thinking	.90	.54	Yes	1.02	.83	-
Adaptive to advances in technology within my field	.75	1.00	-	.61	.83	-
Prepares me to adapt to future trends within field	.89	.94	-	.73	.98	-
Fosters sense of community among my classmates	.62	1.26	Yes	.66	.60	-
Fosters sense of excitement within program	.56	1.14	Yes	.57	.55	-
Fosters sense of pride among my classmates	.68	1.09	Yes	.73	.65	-
Involves high level of faculty interaction	.81	.91	-	.84	.80	-
Opportunities to work closely with faculty	.79	1.20	Yes	.75	.81	-
Helps develop team building skills	1.05	1.34	-	1.50	.80	Yes
Offers immersive learning opportunities	.84	1.09	-	1.14	.68	Yes
Is seldom stressful	-.27	-.17	-	-.05	-.39	-
Is rigorous	.80	.69	-	.68	.86	-
Is challenging	1.08	.91	-	1.00	1.13	-

*Ratings on 5-pt Likert scale ranging from -2="Strongly Disagree" to +2="Strongly Agree"

**Significant difference at $p \leq .05$

Given the similarity exhibited by some of the twenty individual program attribute items originally identified via the focus group sessions, the underlying structure of these attributes was explored using factor analysis. The set of academic program attributes was subjected to principal component analysis. Varimax rotation resulted in a 5 component

dimensional solution exhibiting an eigenvalue greater than 1 explaining 63.4 percent of the attribute data variation. The rotated loadings from this analysis are shown in Table 4 with factor loadings less than 0.5 omitted to highlight the underlying structure. Cross-factor loadings within items were minimal.

An interpretation of each factor noted in Table 4 was assigned by the researchers based upon an intuitively logical alignment of items with each component. Component 1 exhibited high loadings on academic program placement opportunities, off-campus internships, practitioner networking opportunities, and competitive job market advantage. This pattern was thus collectively interpreted as reflecting an “employment” dimension. Component 2 loaded heavily on program attributes associated with fit of program to students’ career interests, appropriate course offering, delivery of career-related knowledge, stimulation of entrepreneurial thinking, relevance to discipline’s technology, and preparation to future trends within discipline. These items collectively were interpreted as reflecting academic program “content”. Component 3 was found to load heavily on three attributes including fostering a sense of community, excitement, and pride among classmates. These were viewed as collectively representing a sense of belongingness and camaraderie and were generically interpreted as a “community” dimension. The fourth component exhibited high loadings on four items including high faculty interaction, opportunities to work closely with faculty, team building, and immersive learning opportunities. These items relate to involvement with faculty and classmates and were interpreted as reflecting a sense of active “involvement”. Finally, component 5 yielded high loadings on rigor, challenge, and stress and were interpreted collectively to suggest a sense of program “rigor”.

Differences in students’ reported satisfaction was examined across each of these five program attribute factor dimensions both between the business and other college units and between the marketing and other majors within the business school. Results are shown in Table 5.

It should be noted that polar ends of the dimensions’ factor loadings are scaled from positive to negative, and negative values do not imply deficiencies but rather only suggest relative differences in student perceptions. With this in mind, survey respondents pursuing business majors reported significantly greater agreement that their major programs of study offer greater employment-related opportunities than did students carrying majors in other college units. In contrast, non-business majors reported higher levels of a sense of community and interaction connected with their academic programs of study. More narrowly within the college of business, marketing majors reported a significantly higher level of program involvement and a lower level of rigor attached to their programs. All other dimensions both across colleges and majors within the college of business exhibited no meaningful differences in students’ mean performance perceptions.

Table 4: Academic Program Attribute Dimensions

My major program.....	Factor 1 Employment	Factor 2 Program Content	Factor 3 Sense of Community	Factor 4 Involvement/ Interaction	Factor 5 Rigor
Offers good placement opportunities	.799	-	-	-	-
Offers many opportunities for off-campus internships	.788	-	-	-	-
Offers practitioner networking opportunities	.747	-	-	-	-
Gives me competitive advantage in job market	.694	-	-	-	-
Content fits my career interests	-	.713	-	-	-
Offers good selection of courses	-	.664	-	-	-
Provides knowledge I will need for success in career	-	.644	-	-	-
Stimulates entrepreneurial thinking	-	.630	-	-	-
Adaptive to advances in technology within my field	-	.585	-	-	-
Prepares me to adapt to future trends within field	-	.511	-	-	-
Fosters sense of community among my classmates	-	-	.776	-	-
Fosters sense of excitement within program	-	-	.720	-	-
Fosters sense of pride among my classmates	-	-	.714	-	-
Involves high level of faculty interaction	-	-	-	.760	-
Opportunities to work closely with faculty	-	-	-	.701	-
Helps develop team building skills	-	-	-	.592	-
Offers immersive learning opportunities	-	-	-	.544	-
Is seldom stressful	-	-	-	-	-.788
Is rigorous	-	-	-	-	.718
Is challenging	-	-	-	-	.633

Note: Factor loadings < .5 omitted

Table 5: Program Attribute Dimension Score Means By College and Business Major

Major Program Dimensions	Colleges		Sig?*	Major Within Business College		Sig?*
	Business	Others	p=	Marketing	Other Bus. Majors	p=
Employment	.137	-.486	Yes	.002	.211	-
Program Content	.037	-.131	-	-.016	.066	-

Community	-.170	.604	Yes	-.168	-.172	-
Involvement	-.091	.323	Yes	.254	-.281	Yes
Rigor	.043	-.153	-	-.204	.179	Yes

*Significant difference at $p \leq .05$

Discussion

This study was undertaken to accomplish two principal objectives to gain insight regarding the current level of satisfaction among students enrolled in different college units at our university and across various major programs of study within the college of business. Second, our overriding interest was to identify strengths and weaknesses in how our marketing program's attributes are perceived by currently enrolled students with an eye toward evaluating our competitive brand position.

The study's findings generally suggest positive program satisfaction and do not point to a significant difference in student satisfaction between business and non-business majors on our campus. Within the college of business, however, marketing majors reported a marginally higher satisfaction level than did those carrying other business program concentrations. Given the survey's sample size and slightly disproportionate over-representation of marketing majors, these patterns need to be further examined in follow-up research.

In exploring differences between colleges and majors along program attributes that might potentially serve as bases for brand differentiation, several interesting perceptual patterns emerged. College of business students appear to perceive their programs as offering greater employment-related potential than their non-business peers while a lower sense of community and faculty interaction. Among business students, however, marketing majors report substantially greater opportunities for participation in team building and immersive learning experiences.

While students report an acceptable level of overall satisfaction, in considering our marketing program's strengths and weaknesses, a key strength continues to be our commitment to immersive learning pedagogy which has served as a cornerstone of our institutional, college, and departmental mission (Gora 2007a 2007b; Sanyal 2012; Wahlers, Jones & Chapman 2014). A single weakness relates to student perceptions regarding competitive job market opportunities compared with other college of business majors particularly in finance and accounting. Given recent successes in the placement rate of our marketing majors, this finding appears to be more one of perceptions than of reality and is

clearly an issue that needs to be addressed with more effective departmental communications to our students.

In general, this exploratory study points to the need for similar follow-up research to assist in developing student targeted communications to better position the department of marketing's brand highlighting its immersive learning and student-faculty involvement strengths and strengthening misperceptions concerning program rigor. Future research is planned to involve a larger, broader student sample and identify additional program attributes which might serve as added points of brand differentiation and positioning.

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Keywords: *student satisfaction, marketing curriculum, brand positioning*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper is useful in identifying students' perceptions of marketing program curricula, assessing satisfaction attributes, and developing program curriculum strategies to address student needs and expectations.

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