



ETHICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION MARKETING: FINDINGS OF A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, business principles and practices are being applied to higher education in government and private institutions to satisfy the needs and desires of education's various "markets" or interest groups on the one hand, and make it financially successful and self-sustaining on the other.

However, higher education is uniquely important to a society's very existence, smooth functioning, and prosperity. Therefore, it is necessary that the educational institutions are not only successful as businesses but are also true to their principal mission of being fair, just, and accessible to individual members of the society, and beneficial to the society as a whole.

This two-phase research project was designed to identify critical marketing practices used in the field of education and determine their ethicality and desirability as viewed by various interest groups.

This paper presents the important facets of the survey instrument developed and the results of a pilot study conducted using a samples of student and instructor respondents. The findings are analyzed for improving the instrument itself to make it more effective in eliciting the required information. They also serve as indicators of the likely results from large and representative samples of the interest groups.

When completed, the study should enable educational institutions and educators to identify problem areas, prioritize them, and develop strategies to deal with them effectively to insure that marketing and business practices used in education are consistent with its primary mission.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education holds a place of unique importance in all societies. Unlike other services, education of its citizens is critical to a society's very existence, smooth functioning, and economic prosperity. This is especially true in the case of poorer countries since education is one affordable way for them engage their citizens productively, and become competitive in the world markets to bring economic wellbeing home. That is why most societies do not spare any effort or expense in creating and sustaining quality educational institutions and making them accessible and affordable to all their citizens. And the role of a government is critical in this regard since often operating



educational institutions is not a profitable enough a venture to attract private initiative and investment. (Joag and Kavil 2014)

Since early 20th century, developments in management sciences have made a major impact on all aspects of our lives. While management has helped enhance the internal efficiency and effectiveness of organizations, marketing, has made a great impact on their external effectiveness as the art and science of persuasion. Together, management and marketing have changed the way governments, business and nonbusiness organizations, and even individuals function in virtually every society.

Realizing the great potential of these developments, higher educational institutions today conceptualize themselves being in the business of service marketing to satisfy the needs and desires of their various “markets” or interest groups on the one hand, and make education financially successful and self-sustaining on the other.

On this background, the unique status of education makes it important to critically examine various marketing and business practices of educational institutions to ensure that they are ethical and consistent with their primary mission of making education fair, just, accessible, and beneficial to individual members of the society, and turn them into an educated, skilled, and productive workforce for the benefit of the society as a whole. (Katz 2009; White 2009; Stote 2012)

ETHICS

Ethics (Murphy et al 2005) can be defined as the moral principles and values that govern the decisions and actions of individuals or groups, and, when faced with moral dilemmas, serve as guidelines /criteria for what actions are good/right/just v. bad/wrong/unjust.

TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF ETHICS

Ethics is often considered as a desirable goal to promote in all business and nonbusiness activities in the society. It is supposed to promote fair dealings, reciprocity, and general well-being of individuals, and long-term sustenance and flourishing of the society as a



whole. Yet, ethics is often not considered as an absolute necessity or the most critical element in making tactical decisions in the short term. Therefore, whenever there are more important countervailing reasons that justify it, ethics may be sacrificed in the interest of greater good.

This ambivalent attitude of societies toward ethics is best reflected in the two conceptualizations or philosophies of ethics: Deontology or Moral Idealism and Teleology or Moral Utilitarianism.

DEONTOLOGY OR MORAL IDEALISM

Deontology takes an idealistic approach to ethics that is most relevant at an individual or microscopic level. It considers certain individual rights and duties as supreme (of supreme import) and considers having moral means and intentions as the prerequisites to justify an act as ethical regardless of its outcome. For example, such a view of ethics would consider “Telling the truth” as an absolute must in all circumstances irrespective of whether or not it hurts someone.

TELEOLOGY OR MORAL UTILITARIANISM (Wilson 1989)

Teleology takes a utilitarian approach to ethics at a social or macroscopic level and uses Society as the unit of analysis. It considers the ultimate results as of supreme import and the sole determinant of the morality of an act and irrespective of the means used. In other words, it emphasizes the attainment of the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals in the society to justify actions regardless of means used and their consequences for a few. Economics of capitalism is founded on this philosophy (Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelius 2013).

This view of ethics would consider approving vaccines for general use to prevent spread of diseases in the society even though the vaccine may harm a few of its uses. It would consider increasing highway speed limits to make transportation faster and more economical even though it would increase fatalities and cost a few lives. And it would justify wars and killing a few to create peace and save many more lives.



CHOICE BETWEEN THE TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF ETHICS

What approach one takes to determining the morality of an act critically depends upon his/her role or nature of involvement in the situation, past experiences, and current vulnerability to the consequences. Or simply stated, the approach depends upon whether or not the decision maker is making the decision as an affected individual or as an objective policy maker for the society as a whole.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

This two-phase research project was designed to identify critical marketing practices used in the field of education and determine their ethicality and desirability as viewed by various interest groups and for the society as a whole.

The first phase study involved conducting detailed in-depth interviews of select members of various target audiences and interest groups—students, teachers, employers, and citizens at large—to identify critical dimensions of education that deserve ethical scrutiny.

Based on the analysis in the first phase, this paper presents the important facets of the survey instrument developed and the results of a pilot study conducted using a samples of student and instructor respondents. The findings are analyzed for improving the instrument itself to make it more effective in eliciting the required information. They also serve as indicators of the likely results from large and representative samples of the interest groups.

THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT AND RESULTS

The survey involved several attitude statements and asked the respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement by using a 5-point scale with 5 indicating strong agreement and 1, strong disagreement with the statement.

Few additional items were used to obtain demographic profile of the respondents for analysis and segmentation purposes.



Important dimensions of education scrutinized for their ethicality are listed below:

1. Considering Education a Business, with Tuition, Financial Aid, & Scholarships as Pricing Decisions
2. Considering Students as Customers
3. Using Grading as a Tool to Motivate
4. Considering Employers & Society as the Ultimate Customers in Setting Educational Program Goals
5. Considering Graduates as Products of Education for Employers & Society as the Ultimate Customers
6. Using Exams & Grading (not to motivate but) only to Evaluate & Certify Learning and Competence for Employers' & Society's Use

The samples were equally divided between male and female. Student respondents were juniors and seniors with average age of 20 years. The instructors' average age was 48 years. Exhibit 1 presents important issues explored in the survey instrument and the results of the pilot study.



Exhibit 1: Important Facets of the Survey Instrument and the Results of the Pilot Study

		Average Response	
		Students	Instructors
1	Like other businesses competing for consumer dollars, it is appropriate for educational institutions to be managed and run as business organizations and use price discrimination, product bundling, spot and heavy discounting to motivate students to enroll immediately.	3.1	1.0
2	Since students are education's immediate customers, and customer is always right, educational institutions should accommodate all needs and desires of students, to keep them happy and motivated and evaluate teachers based on student ratings of their teaching.	4.6	1.3
3	Teachers' job is to first motivate students to do their best, and only then to evaluate them. Therefore, it is okay to reserve a part of the grades for effort, curve or inflate grades, and provide extra-credit opportunities for students to improve their grades.	4.5	1.0
4	Educational institutions must produce graduates who are ready be useful to the employers and the society at large. Therefore, student learning and competence upon graduation (and not their happiness) should be the principal, if not the only, goal of educational programs.	2.1	5.0
5	Since students come in to be trained and turned into finished products of education that must meet the needs of future employers and the society at large, teachers alone should decide how what to teach, rules of conduct in the class, and how to evaluate, grade, and certify students.	3.4	5.0
6	Grades are used by employers and society as indicators of knowledge and skills learned at school. Therefore, grading should be used only to measure, evaluate, and certify student knowledge and skills in the subject matter and nothing else	3.0	5.0

ANALYSIS

The main findings of the study can be summarized thusly.

Not surprisingly, the students generally took the short-term view of each educational practice and judged it based on how it affected them presently as students wanting to graduate with good grades and minimum hardships. They were either not interested or not able to see how each practice affected the quality of their learning and, in turn, their careers in the long term. They also did not attach too much importance to the consequences of each practice on the society as a whole.

Also as could be expected, instructors' views were more consistent with the primary mission of education and evaluated each practice based on how it would affect the overall



quality of student learning, their long term abilities and effectiveness in their chosen careers, and their role as productive members of the society in the future. However, since quality of student learning also depends upon how happy and motivated the students are, the instructors often face the dilemma of having to choose between quality of education and short term student satisfaction. Such dilemmas can reflect in the more tempered views and, more importantly, more tempered practices, of the instructors in situations where the two objectives are in conflict i.e. when insistence on quality of learning (in grading) would negatively affect student motivation, satisfaction, and happiness, which in turn would affect the quality of their learning.

CONCLUSIONS

While having happy, and motivated students would always make an ideal learning environment, considering educators as marketers, and placing on instructors the whole burden of making students happy could—and in fact does create—the vicious circle of compromising quality for short-term student satisfaction and thereby hurting the very mission of a quality education.

Therefore, there is nothing wrong for the educational institutions to continue training educators to become effective marketers or salespersons of education. However, treating student as the “King Customer” and, even worse, making him/her aware that he/she is being considered as the “King Customer” can be very dysfunctional to the very purpose of education.

On the contrary, educational institutions must insist that motivation and commitment are the primary responsibility of students and are prerequisites for admitting and keeping students in a program so that instructors are freed from the pressure of becoming effective short-term salespersons of learning, and can focus on preserving, enhancing, and delivering quality knowledge and skills to the next generations.



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