

# **MARKETING HIGH PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS: A CASE STUDY OF HOW AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY TEACHES EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

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## ***Abstract***

*American companies have complained that students entering the workforce do not have the skills to meet the challenges of a high-performance workplace. To that end, marketing professionals and academics have sought to identify the skills graduates need to succeed in today's competitive marketplace. They agree graduates must have hard and soft skills or employability skills rather than specific marketing knowledge. This article describes an innovative professional skills-based course developed at a large U.S. public university that is helping marketing students increase their employability. It details how the course was modified to mimic the workplace. It lists the course topics, how they translate to specific skills, and the unique methods used to teach the skills. These methods have lift and can be re-used throughout the students' careers.*

*Keywords: employability, education, hard and soft skills, case study, active learning, university*

## **INTRODUCTION**

For decades, American companies have complained that students entering the workforce do not have the skills to meet the challenges of a high-performance workplace. A plethora of reports by industry and academia have confirmed this as well as warned that the global economy and rapid technological change will require a more highly skilled and flexible workforce (Bailey 1997; Candy & Crebert, 1991; Lavelle, 2012). To that end, marketing professionals and academics have sought to identify the knowledge and skills graduates need to secure employment in such an environment (Gray, Ottesen, Bell, Chapman, & Whiten, 2007; Melaia, Abratt, & Bick, G., 2008). Colleges and universities have traditionally focused their curriculums on the knowledge of a field, instead of the requisite skills needed in order to get hired and succeed in that same field. Employers have affirmed the marketing knowledge taught in most marketing pedagogy by universities, however, they also expect graduates to be able to communicate

professionally, listen, multi-task, problem solve, think critically, and work with people – hard and soft skills not normally taught in core marketing courses.

This article addresses the gap between what colleges and universities teach and what employers expect – the employability gap. It starts with asking such imperative questions as: *What skills do employers expect from marketing graduates? What skills should marketing educators teach? How can marketing educators better prepare students to enter a rapidly changing workplace?* Then, it expands on the last question with a case study of the approach used at a large US public university where all business students are required to take a skills-based course in their business discipline. In the field of marketing, the skills-based course is focused on preparing students for a rapidly changing workforce. This article describes how the course was initially developed and how it has since evolved. It expounds on the topics, skills, and methods in the course. Finally, it concludes with the course evaluations and conclusions as well as future considerations for the course.

## **THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP FOR MARKETING GRADUATES**

Marketing professionals and academics seek to identify the critical components of marketing education, in particular, the knowledge and skills graduates need to secure employment and to develop into a successful professional. Common criticisms of business school graduates revolve around their lack of oral and written communication and interpersonal skills, their intolerance for ambiguity, and their inability to think critically — key skills for marketing majors (Johnson, 2011; Lavelle, 2012; Porter, 2007). This lack of skills – real or perceived – is likely the reason marketing and business executives express a preference for liberal arts graduates. Liberal arts graduates are perceived as "strong" whereas business school graduates are perceived as "weak" (Chonko and Caballero, 1991). A recent survey of more than 1,000 employers in various industries asked whether student applicants possess the skills to thrive in the workplace. More than half of the employers said finding qualified applicants were difficult, and just fewer than half said students should receive specific workplace training rather than a more broad-based education (Johnson, 2011). Marketing professionals are employed in varied industries, which present a challenge in determining all the possible skills students need to be employable. This leads to a constant search for the best blend of skills that would prepare marketing graduates for their professional careers.

### **What skills do employers expect from marketing graduates?**

The challenges of competing in the global economy and ever-changing technological advancements have necessitated a redesign of the workplace into an innovative work environment known as the high-performance workplace. The evolving work environment requires a behavior and orientation toward work, which is beyond the step-by-step tasks.

It expects employees at all levels to solve problems, create ways to improve the methods they use, and engage effectively with their coworkers (Bailey, 1997).

Employers expect marketing graduates to have two broad sets of skills. The first set can be classified as marketing knowledge. A robust list of marketing knowledge can be found in materials from the Future Business Leaders of America – Phi Beta Lambda (FBLA-PBL). FBLA-PBL is a nonprofit education association with a quarter million students preparing for careers in business and business-related fields for post-secondary students, alumni, and educators. Because marketing knowledge is well-documented, this article will not discuss them. In addition, with some qualitative variations in teaching delivery and specialized materials, the curriculum is similar across colleges and universities. The second set of skills can be characterized as hard and soft skills. These types of skills, if not acquired, may not provide marketing graduates with a distinct advantage over other college majors in securing a marketing job and having continued success throughout their career. The terminology associated with the hard and soft skills is ‘employability skills’. For the remainder of this article, they will be used interchangeably.

There are many definitions for employability skills. Employability skills are defined as “being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work” (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). They are also defined as “those personal and cognitive capabilities people use to carry out a wide range of tasks and activities” (Dearing, 1997). The American Society for Training and Development or ASTD (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990) is leading foundational work in identifying employability skills, often used as benchmarks or beginning points for international, national, state, and regional studies. The ASTD study identified six groups across all job families: (1) Basic Competency Skills – reading, writing, computation; (2) Communication Skills – speaking, listening; (3) Adaptability Skills – problem solving, thinking creatively; (4) Developmental Skills – self-esteem, motivation, goal-setting, career planning; (5) Group Effectiveness Skills – interpersonal skills, teamwork, negotiation; and (6) Influencing Skills – understanding organizational culture, sharing leadership.

### **What skills should marketing educators teach?**

Employability is an important outcome of education, especially with business-oriented majors such as marketing. Numerous articles and studies discuss the skills students should develop in general as well as in business and marketing courses (Bennett, Dunne, and Carré, 1999; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Zinser, 2003). However, most colleges and universities remain steadfast and continue to focus their teaching on the core functional skills required for the marketing curriculum. They do not customize the marketing curriculum to the demands of the workplace. In a 2006 article, Dacko (2006) reviewed the curriculum of more than 200 business schools. A number of schools had skills courses, which cover specific skills (e.g., communication, writing, speaking, and sales). Only eight schools had a dedicated professional skills course in their curriculum. None of

the schools had a professional skills course in the marketing curriculum. The article concluded marketing graduates are often under-prepped in employability skills and over-prepped in marketing knowledge.

Academia frustration with industry is likely an ideological one, viewing their role as to produce knowledge learners and not future employees with the skills that meet the needs of companies. For business schools and marketing educators, this position is less tolerable given the vocational nature of business education and the business world as well as the governing body for business accreditation. In 2013, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has established a new Standard 4 that requires evidence of job acceptance rates (AACSB, 2013). Hence, some institutions are changing and making a significant effort to align their courses with 'real world' work environments (Candy and Crebert, 1991).

### **How can marketing education better prepare students to enter a rapidly changing workplace?**

The AACSB has heard employers criticize business schools for producing graduates without employability skills such as vision and problem finding, insufficient emphasis on creativity for problem solving, over emphasis on quantitative methods and under emphasis on critical thinking about the external environment in their curriculum (Nicastro and Jones, 1994; Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Also, some employers have even suggested marketing education should focus less on the transmission of marketing knowledge and more on skill development (Cunningham, 1995; Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

There is evidence that teaching embedded skills rather than teaching standalone skills is a stronger approach to acquiring skills. Further evidence shows experiential learning combined with reflective techniques is a positive way to teach required business and professional skills (Baker and Henson, 2010; Stubbs and Keeping, 2002). Professional accreditation is seen as important, but institutions should be careful not to overload modules or design the course too closely to one specific employer's needs.

Experiential and active learning is a step in the right direction to closing the employability gap. Experiential learning focuses on stimulating learning processes and provides more concrete experiences to learn traditional concepts (Bascoul et al., 2013). This approach requires students to practice what they learned in contrast to more traditional lecture and test approaches used in colleges and institutions and marketing courses specifically.

To pursue the skills needed to close the employability gap requires research and experimentation on appropriate skill sets. A substantial literature review found several diverse suggestions and applications, but no comprehensive skills set. To this end, the

author has identified specific employability or hard and soft skills using an experiential and active learning approach.

## **CASE STUDY**

The case study was developed at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). CSULA is part of the largest four-year public university system (California State University) in the U.S. The university has a student body of approximately 22,000. The demographics of the student body reflect ongoing trends in public universities that have an increasing urban-based population: culturally diverse, older, and more female. CSULA is approximately 53% Hispanic, 16% Asian, 11% White, 5% African American; 60% female; the average age is 23.5 years for undergraduate students and 32.3 years for graduate students. The case study is based on a marketing skills-based course titled 'High Performance Professional Skills' (HPPS).

### **Course Development**

HPPS was developed in response to an AACSB sponsored study on business education and development (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). The study findings advocated a skills-based approach to business education. CSULA business administrators, faculty, students, and potential employers' input were obtained and all parties agreed to emphasize skills development in the curriculum, specific to the major and in so doing, the career to follow. Each business discipline developed a skills-based course and made it required for their major.

### **Course Objectives**

HPPS is a four-hour, undergraduate, core requirement for all marketing majors. HPPS has two course prerequisites: principles of marketing and business communications. Most students who take the course are juniors and seniors. The course has the following broad objectives:

1. Identify career/life skills and demonstrate the importance of developing these skills.
2. Develop employable professional skills through conceptual understanding; analysis; self, peer, and faculty assessments; application; and career and team building projects using active learning.
3. Enhance skills developed in other courses in the business school.

### **Course Methodology**

The traditional lecture and discussion methods are integrated with active learning in-class assignments, take-home assignments, team projects, and individual projects. The course simulates the expectations of Corporate America's work environment. This required rethinking course requirements, policies, delivery, and grading. Each of these components is presented below.

**Course Requirements.** The required reading for the course is the popular book, “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Dr. Stephen Covey. This book has been a bestseller for many years and is often required reading for many executives and their companies. The course also includes other books, additional articles, assessments, an original fictitious team case project, and a direct marketing campaign applied to a career goal. Students are graded as follows:

- Exams: The course has no exams (midterms or finals) since most marketing graduates will work in areas where there are no exams (unlike accountants or information technology graduates). The students’ response to this approach typically follows a 360-degree trajectory. The initial reaction is they are pleasantly surprised since this is not typical of most courses. However, after completing the course work, the next reaction is they would have preferred taking exams after all. At the end of the course, the final reaction is a sense of accomplishment and appreciation of the learning and skills they have acquired.
- Coursework: The course has assignments, assessments, and public speaking requirements, which comprise 30% of the course grade. An additional 10% of the course grade is based on peer team evaluations from the team projects. The remainder 60% of the course grade is based on the team projects and the direct marketing campaign applied toward a career goal.

**Course Policies.** The course has the same traditional policies as any other course syllabi such as: absences, academic dishonesty and plagiarism, classroom etiquette, class preparation, communication with the instructor, etc. However, the course modifies some policies to prepare students for the expectations of the workplace. The modifications are listed below.

- Punctuality: Students must be on time. Roll call is taken at the beginning of the class. If students are not in their seats before the official start time of class, then they are not on time. If students are late, then they lose 2 points from the final course grade. Punctuality is required for each class. In Corporate America, most employees are not required to punch in and punch out. If an employee is late, then it is duly noted by his/her peers and management, and can be negative inputs into their performance evaluations.
- Timeliness: All assignments and projects (individual and team) must be turned in on time. Students lose points even if it is a minute late. Coursework turned in after the due date and time is considered late and 20% will be deducted for the first day late and no credit will be given thereafter. There are no makeup opportunities. In Corporate America, turning in work late is not acceptable, and can be negative inputs into performance evaluations.
- Guidelines: Students are required to submit coursework following specific guidelines and are penalized for not doing so. This teaches students to listen and to follow specific instructions. In Corporate America, following instructions is essential

because not doing so can cause critical errors and result in lost productivity and sales and increased costs.

- **Note Taking:** Students must take their own notes. Other than assigned articles, cases, assessments, team projects, and the syllabus, no other handouts are provided. This sets the expectation that not all materials are provided, same as in a business environment, and it is the students' responsibility to create the needed materials. Electronic recording devices are not allowed; this is the same rule followed in Corporate America. The message to the students is not all information will be nicely packaged into a book, article, or course packet. Learning to take notes sharpens critical thinking and listening skills.
- **Grading:** The course does not curve. This establishes the performance expectation for students and dissuades indolent behavior.
- **Electronics:** Electronic devices are not allowed during class unless designated by the in-class exercise. In Corporate America, business protocol is to turn off these devices in professional settings such as meetings with executives and customers.

**Course Topics.** Since HPPS was first offered in 2000, the course has changed direction. Some topics were determined to be more aligned with other marketing courses and were removed. These topics were replaced and over time expanded with more hard and soft skills needed to succeed in the marketing profession. There are now 24 topics. Table 1 lists the topics covered in 2000 and aligns them to the topics covered in 2014. The topics covered in 2000 with asterisks have been moved to other marketing courses.

**TABLE 1:  
HPPS Course Topics in 2000 and 2014**

Topics Covered in HPPS in 2000		Topics Covered in HPPS in 2014	
1	Creativity	Creative Thinking	1
2	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	2
		Problem Solving and Decision-Making	3
3	Negotiating	Negotiating	4
		Gaining and Using Power	5
4	Understanding Cultures*	Self-Assessment	6
5	Selling an Idea/Product/Service*	Personal Persuasion	7
6	Managing Conflict	Change Management	8
7	Servicing Customers*	Public Speaking	9
8	Team Building	Team Building	10
		Facilitation	11
9	Leadership	Leadership	12

Topics Covered in HPPS in 2000		Topics Covered in HPPS in 2014	
		Political Capital	13
10	Listening	Listening	14
		Customer Service	15
11	Providing and Receiving Feedback	Interviewing	16
12	Professional Resources and Learning Opportunities	Writing Effectively	17
		Presentation	18
13	Managing Time and Stress	Personal Management	19
		Project Management	20
14	Lifelong Professional Skills Building	Personal Goal Setting	21
		Career Goal Setting	22
		Career Planning and Development	23
		Image	24

Source: Syllabi of HPPS from 2000 and 2014

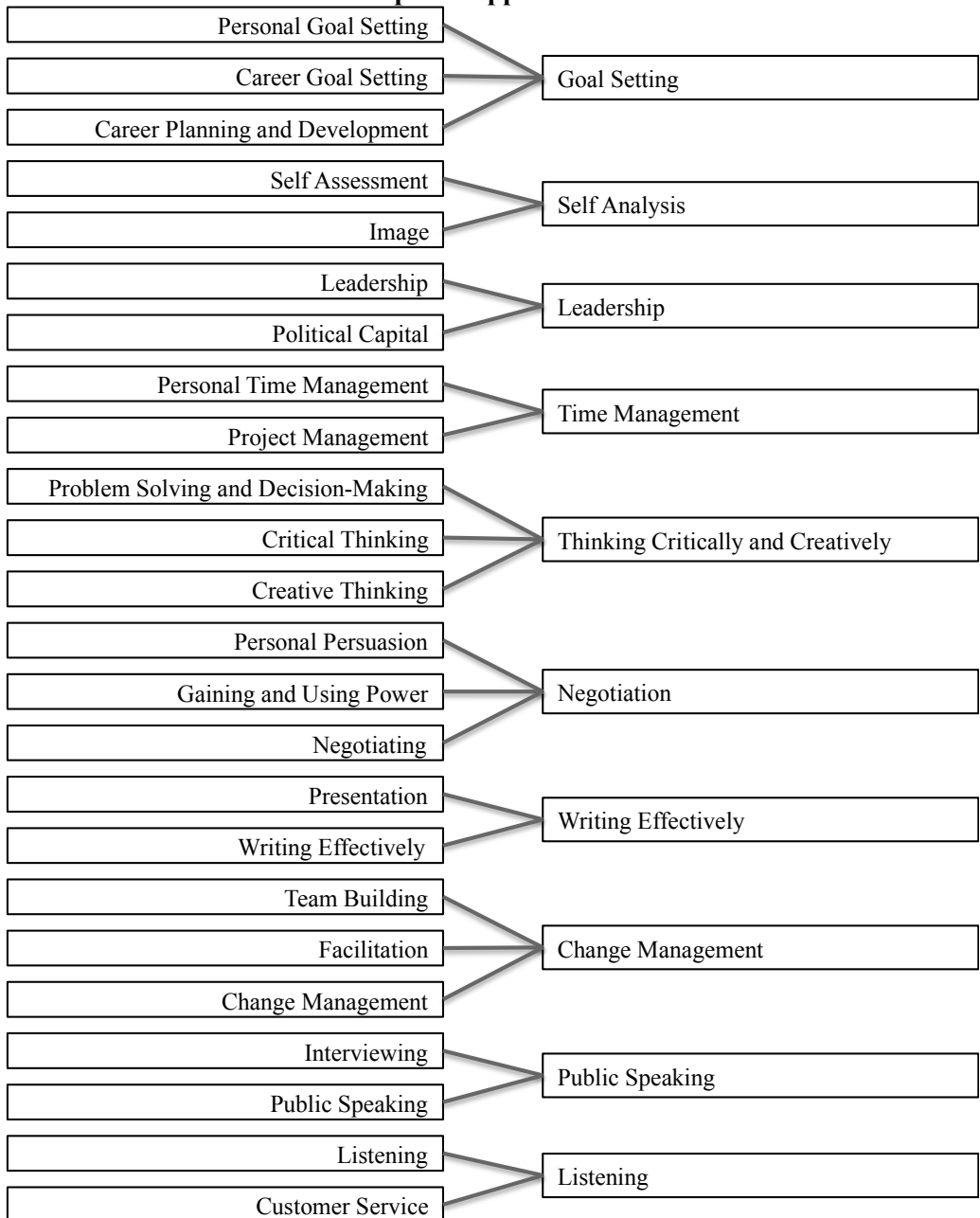
**Course Topics Mapped to Skills.** The course topics can be grouped and mapped to skills. There are a total of 10 dominant skills. Figure 1 depicts the 24 course topics mapped to the 10 dominant skills

**Methods Used to Teach the Skills.** The course uses various methods to teach the 10 dominant skills. These methods should not be viewed as optional, but should become more mainstream so marketing graduates are empowered with the skills to be successful in today's competitive environment.

- Professional Books: In addition to the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, the course also includes “Who Moved My Cheese”, which is widely used in business to address personal and organizational change. It depicts how different people react to change and contains a powerful message for success. In using professional books in the course, students are encouraged to use them throughout their career.
- Assessments: At the beginning of the course, students complete an initial self-assessment to identify gaps and areas of improvement. They validate and modify this self-assessment with peers and mentors to gain a more unbiased, impartial perspective. At the end of course, they complete the self-assessment again to see how they've improved. They still seek validation from peers and mentors; the expectation is there is a better synchronization of the students' self assessments and the assessments of third parties. In using assessments, students are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are better prepared for the performance evaluations to follow throughout their career.



**FIGURE 1:  
HPPS Course Topics Mapped to Dominant Skills**



- **Team Projects:** Students work in teams on various projects and assignments. Each student is required to fill a different role on the team; the same student cannot always be the leader. All students must present. Students learn to identify and leverage each person's strengths and weaknesses, work through conflicts, develop leadership and interpersonal skills, and use project management skills to complete the project on time. A complete work product includes a written paper in Microsoft Word, a presentation in Microsoft PowerPoint (or equivalent), a project plan in Microsoft Project, a visual or diagram in Microsoft Visio, and finally the oral presentation itself to peers (students) and management (instructor and/or business professionals). In using team projects, students are exposed to how work gets done in Corporate America and learn how to overcome challenges.
- **Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal:** This unique project applies the skills of marketing (i.e., market research, marketing plan, marketing campaigns) to help students pursue a career goal. Students use the structure and process steps of conducting a direct marketing campaign, but apply it to their career goals (e.g., finding a job after graduation, being accepted to graduate school, obtaining a new position in their company), in the same manner as a marketing manager would do in the workplace toward the companies' goals. In using this approach, students have increased their retention of the marketing skills taught because they see the relevance to their lives (Jackson 2012).

Table 2 provides examples of each method. In general, methods were added over time and balanced with the course schedule where active learning was critical to facilitating retention. Table 3 identifies the 10 dominant skills applied in each method.

### **Course Evaluation**

One measure of course success is the number of students enrolled who are not required to take the course. HPPS has been offered at CSULA for 13 years. From 2006 to 2013, 53 sections were offered totaling approximately 2,491 students. Approximately 20 percent of the students were non-marketing majors and approximately 10 percent of the 20 percent were not business majors at all.

Another measure of course success is the student evaluations. Table 4 summarizes the responses of approximately 1,200 students from 2009 to 2012. In summary, student gave the course high ratings across all questions, e.g., greater than 4.5 on a 5-point scale. HPPS rated higher than other courses in the Marketing Department for all questions except questions 8 and 11. These ratings are not statistically significant at an alpha level of .05. Often a high evaluation could be biased based upon the overall GPA grade distribution for the course (Eiszler, 2002). On a 4.0 GPA scale, the average GPA for HPPS was 2.47 for this period. This grade distribution is within the departmental norm.

**TABLE 2:  
Methods Used to Teach the Skills**

<b>Methods</b>	<b>2000-2001</b>	<b>2002-2004</b>	<b>2005-2008</b>	<b>2009-2011</b>	<b>2012-2014</b>
<b>Professional Books</b>					
7 Habits of Highly Effective People	X	X	X	X	X
Who Moved My Cheese	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
<b>Assessments</b>					
Self-Assessment: Skills	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Change Management	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Listening	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Leadership	X	X	X	X	X
Peer Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Faculty Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Mentor Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Team Projects</b>					
Written Presentation	X	X	X	X	X
Oral Presentation	X	X	X	X	X
Project Management	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
Status Report	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
Technical Application using Software	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
<b>Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal</b>					
Goal Setting	X	X	X	X	X
Journal/Portfolio	X	X	N/A	X	X
Market Research	X	X	N/A	X	X
Marketing Plan	N/A	X	X	X	X
Campaign Management / Personal Branding	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	X

*Source: Syllabi of MKT 325 Course from 2000 - 2014*

N/A = Not taught

**TABLE 3:  
Skills Applied in each Method**

<b>Dominant Skill</b>	<b>Professional Books</b>	<b>Assessments</b>	<b>Team Projects</b>	<b>Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal</b>
Goal Setting	X	X		X
Self-Analysis	X	X		X
Leadership	X	X	X	X
Time Management	X	X	X	X
Thinking Critically and Creatively	X		X	X
Negotiation / Selling	X		X	X
Writing Effectively	X		X	X
Change Management	X		X	X
Public Speaking	X		X	X
Listening	X		X	X

**CONCLUSION**

Employers, business schools, and the AACSB have identified the employability skills business students need to succeed in today's competitive environment. These employability skills are often defined as hard and soft skills. Marketing professionals

**TABLE 4  
Summary of Student Evaluations to HPPS from 2009 to 2012 (based on 1,200 students)**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Survey Question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1	The course syllabus clearly stated course objectives, requirements and grading criteria.	4.78	0.48
2	The readings and assignments contributed to my understanding of the subject.	4.56	0.61
3	Exams, projects, papers, etc. were good measures of the course material.	4.75	0.21
4	The instructor provided timely feedback about	4.68	0.79

<b>Item</b>	<b>Survey Question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
	my performance in the class.		
5	The instructor clearly presented the subject matter.	4.54	0.59
6	The instructor was well prepared.	4.60	0.53
7	The instructor demonstrated knowledge of the subject matter.	4.56	0.61
8	The instructor was accessible to provide requested help in the subject.	4.55	0.59
9	The instructor was respectful and unbiased when interacting with the students.	4.60	0.63
10	The course contributed to my intellectual growth and/or helped me develop useful skills.	4.64	0.68
11	Overall the instructor was an effective teacher.	4.58	0.58

*NOTE: Scale was 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree*

acquire not only hard skills, but also soft skills throughout their careers. Hard skills are associated with functional areas of expertise such as: database marketing, market research, campaign management, and web marketing. A marketing professional's growth and progression will depend on acquiring and mastering soft skills in order to advance their careers to the levels of Marketing Manager, Brand Manager, Marketing Director, and ultimately, Chief Marketing Officer.

HPPS was developed to close the employability gap for marketing students. The traditional structure of a course was drastically modified so that it mimics the workplace environment students will encounter in Corporate America upon graduation. It lays the foundation of hard and soft skills and uses unique methods to teach these skills. These methods have lift and relevance throughout the students' careers; they consist of reading professional books; conducting assessments at all levels: individual (self and introspective), peer (colleagues and subordinates), instructor (mentor), and management (supervisor and executive); working in teams; and marketing oneself, all of which are critical elements of managing one's career. During the 4-year period where data was available, the average GPA for HPPS was 2.47 on a 4.0 GPA scale, yet it received ratings greater than 4.5 on a 5-point scale on all questions. The course was so successful that approximately 20 percent of the students were not even marketing majors. Student feedback offers one perspective of the course success. HPPS could benefit from employers perspective with respect to campus recruiting of marketing students for internships, full-time and part-time employment.

## FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal project has been well received. HPPS should develop more active learning projects to enhance the students' learning and retention (Bascoul et al., 2013; Jackson, 2012). As the marketing profession evolves, so too will the need for the evolution of topics covered in HPPS. This will require faculty to stay abreast of trends and changes in the industry. HPPS will need to develop new methods to better instill concepts in students. It may leverage the typical test and learn approach used in marketing campaigns. HPPS is a model for bridging the gap between universities curriculum and 'real world' marketing. The outcome will lead to a better-prepared and more employable marketing graduate.

From a research perspective, HPPS offers fertile ground for further study of marketing graduates and their employability post-graduation from various stakeholders. For example:

1. Survey marketing students to assess their perceptions of the skills acquired in HPPS before, during, and post graduation.
2. Survey alumni at various post graduation stages to obtain their feedback on curriculum enhancements and skills marketing graduates will need.
3. Survey employers to identify and prioritize critical employable skills required of marketing professionals at various stages of their careers.
4. Survey employers on the quality of marketing graduates with respect to campus recruiting for internships, full-time and part-time employment.
5. Track the career choices and progression of marketing graduates with respect to their assessments and performance in the HPPS course.

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