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Incorporating Professionalism Labs into Marketing Curriculum

Tatia Jacobson Jordan

The University of Texas at Arlington

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how to address present challenges in marketing education as a result of evolving student demographics and external conditions that leave students unprepared for the job market. Strategically incorporating professionalism labs, or career classes, into marketing department curriculum allows matriculating marketing students to hone the soft-skills that they need to transition successfully into professional positions.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing recruiters and professionals have created an awareness of the need for matriculating students to work on their “soft skills.” These so-called soft-skills have figured prominently in surveys as those that students coming straight out of college need to improve. They include general qualities such as the ability to network, carry on conversations with clients, and stay poised under pressure. Additional topics that have been mentioned in surveys are: social media proficiency, telephone communication techniques, and general business and dining etiquette (McDaniel & White, 1993; Taylor, 2003; Young & Murphy, 2003; Ferrell, et. al., 2015).

Adding a sense of urgency to this perceived lack in our marketing students are both federal and state educational policies that continue to promote broader access to higher education, enrolling many more first-generation college students who may lack experience practicing or performing these skills in a professional position (Chen, 2005). Since the recession, unemployment statistics for young college graduates aged 20-24 peaked at 10 percent and declined to 8 percent in 2013 (Koc & Tsang, 2015). Because the young adult unemployment rate hovers at around twice the overall national average, and because college tuition rates have skyrocketed, administrations are renewing their emphasis on student outcomes. The Department of Education under Barack Obama created a college scorecard that specifically showcases graduation rates and average salaries for each university (www.collegescorecard.com). Despite these external pressures, university budgets have not allocated more university dollars to Career Development Centers since the recession (Koc & Tsang, 2015).

The University of Texas at Arlington, facing similar internal and external challenges, with an understaffed career development center, and receiving less than positive feedback on some of these soft-skills from companies who had hired our graduates, began to consider a college of business policy change. Other universities have responded by instituting an additional one-to three credit-hour class to cover professionalism topics, or by revising the 3000-level Business Communications (BCOM) course to specifically include more hands-on career development activities that would cover some of these skills, including mock interviews, and résumé workshops (Taylor, 2003).

Universities have also recommended increasing student access to marketing professionals in the form of guest lectures, or instituting programs that inform students about potential career paths in order to develop these skills that prove the most valuable in helping our marketing students land jobs upon graduation (Henke, 1988; Young & Murphy, 2003). The issue many of these universities run into, however, is one of guaranteed attendance. If students perceive that the information is ungraded, undergraduate students are less likely to attend the event.

To address these aforementioned dilemmas, the University of Texas at Arlington's College of Business marketing department instituted a 50-minute per week "lab" component that corresponds with the required 3 credit hour business communication (BCOM) lecture course. This new component was created to enhance the professionalism and career topics that the students needed more instruction on than was possible in the larger lecture classes, and are therefore designed to complement the lecture with longer discussions in the lecture. The lab course uses a variety of delivery methods, including guest speaker presentations, an online curriculum component, class discussion, and role-playing scenarios.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives are as follows:

1. Gain vital knowledge from industry leaders related to professionalism in the workplace.
2. Understand the types of appropriate professional dress within the workplace.
3. Increase ability to professionally network and interact with local business leaders.
4. Improve knowledge on how to professionally navigate through the employment process.
5. Create and hone a LinkedIn account.
6. Demonstrate effective techniques regarding small talk, introductions and office etiquette.
7. Increase insight on the use of proper dining skills within professional business environments.
8. Complete an Acclaim Professionalism Badge to showcase on LinkedIn.
9. Complete an E-Portfolio designed with personal branding steps and initiatives.
10. Complete a mock interview during COB Mock Interview Week.
11. Complete and peer-review an online interview with Interview Stream.
12. Develop an action plan to improve personal professionalism.

Supplemental readings from business articles available online were incorporated into the class. Other instructional tools have included an online subscription called the "Bloomberg Business Week B-School Connection Program," an enhancement that offered access to self-assessments and worksheets that are useful for discussing professional goals. Once the Pearson curriculum was adopted, however, their self-assessments replaced this program.

These learning objectives have evolved since the program's inception. The BCOM labs used the same textbook as the lecture, Peter Cardon's *Business Communication: Developing Leaders for a Networked World*, with a recent switch to John Thill and Courtland Bovee's *Excellence in Business Communication*, which is supplemented with Pearson online curriculum, including the

My Career Success Lab component. This curriculum gives the students written information and exercises that are tailored to the classroom topics, including personality and career exploration exercises; personal branding steps and instructions that allow the student to complete an E-Portfolio; professional dress and etiquette, networking, and interviewing information; and a professionalism badge access card, which, upon completion of the course, inserts a “Professionalism Badge” onto the student’s LinkedIn account and their E-Portfolio.

Course Topics

Teaching faculty in the marketing department lead the courses and solicit guest speakers from the business and university communities to discuss specialized topics. The topics are fluid for each semester; the following have been incorporated since Fall 2016:

Mind Your Manners: Etiquette in the Workplace

This lesson teaches workplace etiquette, specifically instructing students on how to professionally navigate the workforce. This topic can include but is not limited to:

- a literal discussion of a professional’s space and place in the workplace;
- proper hygiene;
- volume of one’s voice;
- appropriate workplace discussion topics;
- acceptable workplace conversation;
- cell phone usage;
- headphone usage;
- gift-giving; and related topics.

Interviewing Strategies and Tools

This lesson teaches students specific information about job hunting in the final few semesters before they graduate. This is a great opportunity to engage other departments on campus, for example, the Career Development Centers, as mentioned earlier, to explore with the students exactly what they will need to do to prepare to enter the workforce in their final semesters on campus. Topics include but are not limited to:

- Mock interview strategies;
- Online interviewing tools, including the Interview Stream tool (this varies according to campus resources);
- Self-assessments;
- Networking;
- Optimizing your LinkedIn profile to obtain interviews;
- Overcoming perceived barriers;
- Job search strategies;
- Salary negotiations;
- Responding to standard interview questions;
- Interview follow up;

- Changing careers.

Dining Etiquette

This lesson teaches dining etiquette, specifically as it pertains to interviews for job-seeking students as they graduate, as well as their future role in entertaining clients. This topic can include a literal discussion of:

- place-settings in formal and informal professional dinners;
- a how-to on the use of utensils;
- dining table dos and don'ts;
- napkin etiquette;
- cell phones at the table;
- specific food instruction, including soup and bread, and related topics.

Branding Yourself: Social Media

This topic highlights professionalism and social media, specifically as it pertains to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, all programs that contemporary students need to familiarize themselves with (Schlee & Harick, 2013). The discussion centers on creating an awareness of the students' social media public profile. The topics are designed to get students thinking about their personal brand and the impact of any negative information on their job hunt and subsequent career.

This topic also includes instruction for students on using social media platforms to further their careers by taking the time to craft and create a positive personal brand on social media. Every student sets up a LinkedIn profile as they begin to connect with university groups, network with alumni, and collect professional endorsements.

This topic has been expanded to include an E-Portfolio through Foliotek. The addition of the Pearson online component through a partnership with Foliotek gives each student a four-year subscription to the service, which allows them to create an online account showcasing their résumés, all badges earned, and five projects possessing both visual and written components viewable by all future employers and sharable through social media accounts, should the student so desire.

Professional Dress for Men & Women

This lesson should ideally be delivered by a guest speaker who is a clothing specialist, as their level of expertise creates significant value for the student. Many retailers have specific outreach programs tailored for college audiences, and are eager for the opportunity to present to potential customers. Several clothing professionals include samples of professional dress, and at the end of the presentation offer coupons and discounts to the students. Men's Wearhouse, for example, offers a Dress for Success program that covers these topics, which are included but are not limited to:

- All facets of men and women's business dress from casual, to most formal;

- Cuff lengths;
- Sleeve lengths;
- Colors to wear for an interview;
- Hair and makeup;
- Hygiene;
- Making a positive first impression;
- Shoe choices;
- Specific interview dress strategies, and related topics.

Making LinkedIn Work for You

This lesson highlights how to use LinkedIn professionally to network for jobs after graduation. Students specifically learn how to create an account, how to showcase their skills in a short summary, how to ask for recommendations on LinkedIn, how to create a list of skills that co-workers can endorse, and how to customize their LinkedIn profiles so that a google search will reveal their LinkedIn profiles before other social media accounts. The most recent addition to the curriculum, Foliotek, offers numerous LinkedIn assignments that the students must complete that allows the student the opportunity to accomplish these tasks as they work through the online component.

Mock Interview Week

It became apparent the first semester that this career lab was introduced at UTA that a mock interview component was needed. If the lab focused on building the students' professionalism and career skills, then the culminating activity of the semester should be a mock interview for the student to practice these newly-honed skills.

At the University of Texas at Arlington's Lockheed Martin Career Development Center, the marketing department reserved 10 interview rooms over a five-day period in which students could meet 1) with career development center staff, or 2) with actual business men and women from the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Because student skill level varied, they were paired up according to desired outcomes. To practice interviewing, students could mock interview with staff. Students closer to graduation interviewed with actual potential employers who had volunteered for this event. Students were graded on a rubric at the event, with most interview participants giving and getting extensive feedback both verbally, and written on their interview performance, as well as explicit feedback on student résumés.

Mock Interview Week at UTA was so successful, it has now become a college of business staple, with every semester garnering increased interest by the local community.

Additional Topics

Additional topics can include: "Financial Literacy for New College Graduates," "Navigating Generations in the Workplace," and "Transitioning from Student to Professional Life,"

depending on class demographics. Faculty also invites marketing professionals as guest speakers to discuss how they navigated their careers, giving the students the opportunity to professionally network with local businessmen and –women in specific marketing careers.

Faculty has the discretion to amend topics to fill in perceived gaps in instruction. For example, in Fall 2016, it became apparent after the curriculum was set that at least 50% of our students either had no idea what LinkedIn was, nor had they ever used it. This observation also held for subsequent semesters. Our response to this discovery was to create an assignment for spring semester in which each student completed a LinkedIn profile to assist them in their job hunt upon graduation. This allows us the bonus of connecting each student with our college of business on LinkedIn to enhance the possibility of future communication with the students as they transition to alumni status.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lab places a high premium on participation. Attendance is mandatory, and students are graded on participation. Pearson online assignments, including the E-Portfolio and the professionalism badge must be completed to pass the class. Students upload assignments to Blackboard, as well as participate in and complete online and in-class group assignments.

As is true of lecture and lab combination courses, the students must pass both lecture and lab components or retake the failed course component within two semesters to receive their final grade. The grades in lecture and lab are not averaged, allowing the student to pick the best schedule for both lecture and lab without being concerned with having the same faculty for both.

Qualitative Analysis **Faculty Observations:**

The course has evolved significantly over time. The quality of guest speakers, for example, improved from the first semester to the second, as the faculty assessed which guest speakers interacted with the classes most effectively and invited them back for the second semester.

The topics were also specifically tailored to the students' needs in the second semester, as the faculty ascertained student needs from one semester to the next. The students exhibited a resistance to the course itself in the first semester, as this course required the students to stay on campus an extra fifty minutes per week. Therefore, the challenge the first two semesters was primarily to create value so that future students would be more inclined to view the class as a component part of the course, and not as an extra requirement. Most recently, the positive feedback from students has confirmed these observations.

Quantitative Analysis **University Assessment:**

While it is the goal of this course to give the students knowledge and skills that they will use in future professional positions, assessing that information remains a challenge. However, we did review the course results obtained from the university assessment office. Students in seven sections in the fall, three sections in the spring, and five in the next fall, were anonymously surveyed during the last week of classes. They replied to two specific items about the course content. The following results were reported:

Assessment Results

	Fall 2016:	Spring 2016:	Fall 2017:
Number of Student Responses	306	128	286
Agree or Strongly Agree: I acquired knowledge that will be useful in the future	83%	91%	92%
Agree or Strongly Agree: I acquired skills that will be useful in the future	81%	92%	95%

As anticipated, the number of students who agree that they are acquiring knowledge and skills that are useful in the future continues to increase as the quality and value of the information given rises. We anticipate these numbers will continue to increase in future semesters for these reasons.

Student Reflection Papers:

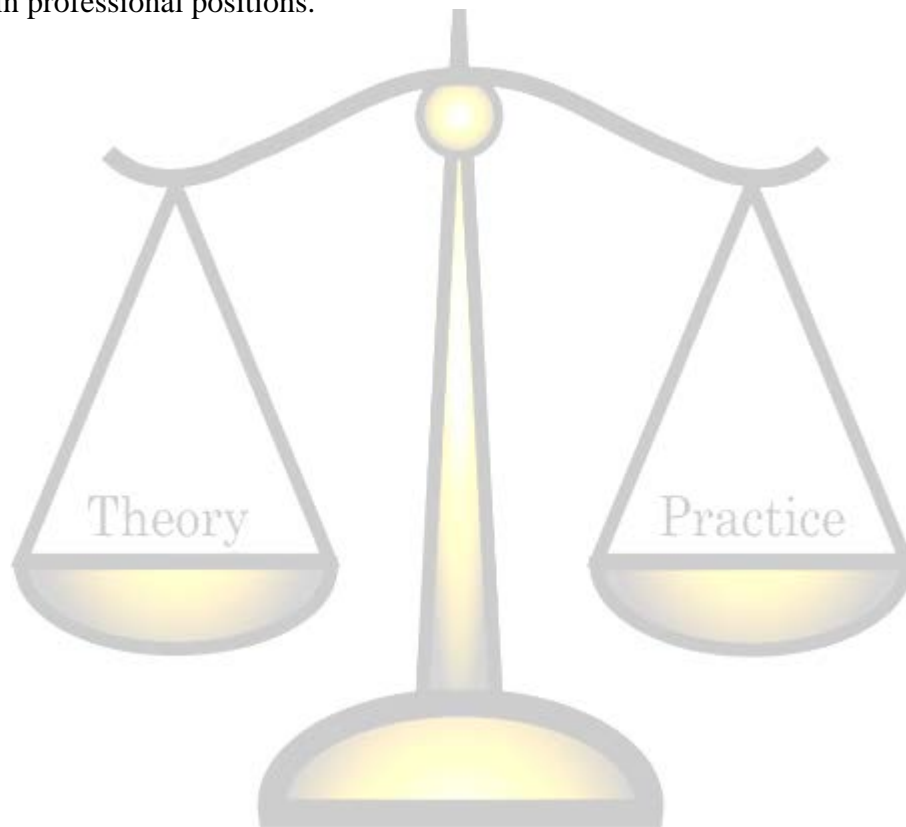
Anonymous student comments were included as part of the course assessment. In these, students detailed more specifically course components that were useful, as the following excerpts show:

- Our guest speaker went over dining etiquette. I originally thought that I already knew most of everything about dining etiquette, but I was proven wrong. Everything that she went over in class I will carry on with me throughout my life.
- I feel like we covered everything that is vital to our future careers; this was an amazing class. This class makes me feel way more confident about entering the future in business.
- I found the lectures “Interview Stream & Interviewing Strategies” and “Professionalism & Social Media” to be the most interesting and beneficial to me. I’m at a point in my education where I’m attempting to find an internship based on my declared major, and to hear what employers are looking for and the impact of social media on the hiring process was really enlightening. I learned proper dining etiquette and I had previously heard of LinkedIn but until this class I had no idea what it was intended for or how to use it to my advantage with networking or obtaining a job.
- I learned more than I ever thought I could in this lab this semester and think that it will greatly help me in my future. Thanks for keeping everything so interactive and interesting.

Overall, the positive feedback and responses from the students have generated greater interest in this program change. The College of Business is on track to adapt the course toward all business

majors. Additionally, an undergraduate leadership class made up of high-achieving students has adapted the professionalism course for use in its program. Future adaptations may include incorporating this into the graduate student business communication course, also taught through the marketing department.

We believe that by directly discussing and modeling professionalism, the lab component course change addresses the challenge posed by having a larger and more diverse student population, many of whom are graduating without the soft-skills that they need to transition into the job market. This course also directly addresses the challenges faced externally as universities are required to release job placement statistics. The belief is that these professionalism labs will contribute to a higher employment rate and better opportunities for our marketing students who aspire to be in professional positions.



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