The Unification of Marketing and Assessment in Higher Education: A Model

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ABSTRACT

A marketing assessment model that includes university outcome measures is presented. The model incorporates consumer expectations theory and marketing strategy. Findings indicate that student expectations vary among the undergraduate population. Marketing implications for student recruitment and retention efforts are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are facing tremendous internal and external pressures that will extend into the twenty-first century. Internal challenges demand that admission departments recruit the best possible student and in sufficient numbers. External demands scream for “justifications” in multiple areas. Cress (1996) reviewed pressures from legislators, business, and the public to report outcomes. Simply stated, people are demanding to know what is happening with students enrolled in colleges and universities. As such, Cress reviewed various frameworks for assessment and methodologies. Her primary goal is to improve retention by focusing on instructional and support programs.

External demands for accountability have renewed an interest in the marketing of colleges and universities. There appears to be two emerging streams of research focus: (1) consumer expectations in regard to product and service quality (Grewal, 1995; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996); and (2) institutional image and marketing in higher education (Kotler and Fox, 1985; Hensley, 1995; Sevier, 1996). The challenge is to balance the two.

Market researchers argue that people’s perceptions are critical to an institution’s well being (Topor, 1986). The theory postulates that image will affect a university. In particular, the ability to attract new students, recruit faculty, receive outside research funding, or secure gifts, all rest on an institution’s perceived image. Therefore, it is in every institution’s best interest to understand the concept of image. The overall goal of institutional marketing should be to ensure that the image is congruent with circumstance.

Image for all practical purposes is a perception. Kotler and Fox in 1985 asserted that a responsive institution has a strong interest in how its public see the school, its programs, and services. The researchers concluded that individuals often respond to the institution’s image and not reality. Gronroos (1983) suggested that the perceived quality of a service will be the result of an evaluation process in which customers compare their perceptions of service delivery against what they expected. Similarly, Parasuraman et al. (1988) considered that a customer’s assessment of overall service quality depends on the gap between expectations and perceptions of actual performance levels.

Given this brief overview, the major research objective of this paper is to discuss the marketing of an institution of higher education by evaluating an assessment model that incorporates accountability measures. The major findings will address the role of perceptions on marketing and outcome assessment. Specifically, the research questions of interest are as follows:

1. Can a marketing assessment model include university outcome measures?
2. Do “undergraduate” expectations of their academic student life change as they matriculate?
3. What are the similarities and differences of “undergraduate” expectations as a function of class rank?
4. What are the marketing implications for recruiting and retention efforts on campus?
5. How can a university use this assessment model to guide its marketing efforts?
METHODOLOGY

Four hundred and twenty-five students in residential housing received an open-ended questionnaire examining personal expectations of their university experience. The survey requested a student fill-in by category those areas of service that had Fallen Short of Expectations, Met Expectations, or Exceeded Expectations; hence, the format minimizes the risk of establishing a response set. Each category was later given a rank score on a three point scale. For example, a mean score of 2.5 indicates a response rating that lies midway between “Met Expectations” and “Exceeded Expectations.” In an attempt to understand the interaction between a rating and the number of responses, the multiplication of the two scores creates a variable designated as “value.” The value score sorts responses according to a created hierarchy listing the top five and bottom five expectations. The goal is two fold: (1) to determine the areas in which the university exceeds student expectations; and (2) to examine what areas fall short of student expectations for each class-rank. Survey distribution followed an alternate floor sampling of males and females.

FINDINGS

Results found proportional characteristics of demographics (i.e., gender and class rank) to be within ± 3% of the total population. The sample size (n = 288) represented only those participants who responded in every category and provided their class rank; therefore, the sample was large enough for representativeness at a 95% confidence level (see Krejcie, 1970). In Table 1, simple regression models tested if class rank could account for a significant amount of variance in predicting the number of responses per expectation category; eight areas were found significant. Likewise, when qualitatively contrasting Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior expectation responses, personal value ratings were significantly different. For example, Freshmen rated faculty, dormitories, and the student/professor ratio as high; whereas Seniors gave a high value score to grades, dining, and support services. The contrast in findings were similar for Sophomores and Juniors; also, these differences in perceptual values held for low ratings across class rank.

IMPLICATIONS

This study examines five specific research questions. The first question asks if a marketing assessment model could include university outcome measures. The findings suggest that a marketing assessment is not only plausible but practical. In review, each participant’s response becomes a criterion measure when clustered. Likewise, individual items offer an opportunity for grouping, therefore lending itself to theoretical or empirical factor matching (see Terkla and Pagano, 1993). Also, collective responses could represent a general outcome measure. All in all, the efficacy of combining assessment with marketing strategies appears warranted.

The second question of interest explores whether undergraduate expectations of their academic and student life change as they matriculate. Findings clearly demonstrate that each class-rank has a different “top” and “bottom” expectations list. Thus, the answer is yes; there appears to be a shift in value as the student matriculates. This suggests that student expectations are not static but rather dynamic and in process. Therefore, assessment and marketing efforts are best when flexible, class-specific, and open-ended.

A third area of research focuses on the similarities and differences of undergraduate expectations as a function of class rank. Table 1 presents statistical hypotheses examining the ability of class rank to predict expectation response. By interpretation, Freshmen either perceive university services as fallen short of, or exceeding expectations; Sophomores have an equal chance for all expectation areas; services met expectations for Juniors; and university service met or exceeded expectations for Seniors. In sum, similarities and differences exist in relationship to class rank. Knowledge of this point is vital when coordinating internal or external assessment and marketing efforts. Internal awareness of class features should strengthen retention efforts and external applications could impact Freshman recruitment and/or provide bonafide reasons for transfer students to apply to the institution.

The fourth question examines the marketing implications for recruiting and retention. In addition to previously listed advantages, the findings strongly confirm what Hauser and Clausing (1988) expressed as the necessity for any company (i.e., University) to understand their customers (i.e., Students) and to use consumer product quality expectations (i.e., Assessment Models) in developing their product mix. In essence, a university should shape its product according to what it does best; and determining what it does best can be as easy as implementing an expectations survey.

In completing this investigation, research
Table 1

Regression Models: Testing if Class Rank Accounts for a Significant Amount of Variance in Predicting the Number of Responses per Expectation Category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Rank</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R-squared</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>alpha</th>
<th>Ho:</th>
<th>Sign.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>4.641E-4</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.712</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NS</td>
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<td>.269</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>.0001</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.149</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
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<td>.125</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>12.08</td>
<td>.0006</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>4.774E-4</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.289</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>26.70</td>
<td>.0001</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>295</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4.73</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>S</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.203</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>.0004</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Hypotheses (Ho:) categorized as Fallen Short of Expectations denoted by (<); Met Expectations denoted by (=); Exceeded Expectations denoted by (>).

question five inquires as to how a university can use this marketing assessment model to guide an institution. Sevier (1996) reviewed the paradigmatic 4 P’s of marketing and concluded that a “savvy” institution uses all four, and does not use one to the exclusion of the others. The same is true for this presented assessment model, all scores representing Fallen Short of Expectations, Met Expectations, or Exceeded Expectations can be employed in the marketing and evaluation of an institution of higher education.

REFERENCES


Gronroos, Christina (1983), Strategic Management and Marketing in the Service Sector, Marketing Science Institute, #83-104.


