THE UNDERGRADUATE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR COURSE: CURRENT STATUS AND PEDAGOGIES

Douglas J. Lincoln, The University of Mississippi

Abstract

This paper reports the results of a survey measuring the current status of the undergraduate consumer behavior course in American four year colleges and universities. Specific attention is given to the pedagogies of consumer behavior instructors.

Introduction

Consumer behavior has been defined as:

> "those acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts"

(Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, 1978, p. 3). In its most basic form, the study of consumer behavior is concerned with "why" consumers behave as they do in the marketplace. Arguments favoring the study of consumer behavior are usually presented from two directions. First, knowledge of consumer behavior produces more efficient use of business resources. Second, consumer protection through public policy is enhanced by an understanding of consumer behavior.

Since the late 1950's and early 1960's, business decision makers have touted the marketing concept which requires, among other things, a customer orientation. Logically, such an orientation seems impossible without knowledge of consumer behavior. More specifically, such knowledge potentially aids business decision makers in four major ways: (1) evaluating new market opportunities, (2) choosing market segments, (3) increasing the efficiency of strategies and tactics and (4) improving retail performance (Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, 1978, pp. 7-11).

The design of public policy which is to be accepted by consumers and will permit cures for society's problems requires a thorough understanding of the needs, desires, and actions of the consumers for whom the policies are developed. Such an understanding helps to provide answers to issues such as airline and natural gas deregulation, corrective advertising, "blue laws," and others.

It is clear that the study of consumer behavior should be a high priority component of marketing education. Evidence of the recognition of its importance to marketing education is easily found. In 1970 the Association for Consumer Research was founded, and in 1975 the first issue of Journal of Consumer Research appeared. There has also been a great increase in the number of articles, notes, communications and textbooks concerning themselves with consumer behavior educators.

Despite the recognition that consumer behavior should be included in the undergraduate marketing curriculum, no study has recently measured the extent of its popularity or more importantly, the teaching approaches used by consumer behavior educators.

Purpose

The general purpose of this study is to describe the current status of the teaching of consumer behavior at the undergraduate level in American four year colleges and universities. First, it is of interest to identify how popular the course is at these institutions and describe the course's role in these institutions. Second, and of most importance, the study intends to describe the various pedagogies of undergraduate consumer behavior educators. The generation of such a description is a contribution to marketing education literature which tends to be dominated by "this is the way I do it" reports. With a depiction of nationwide consumer behavior pedagogies, individual educators will be able to compare and contrast their approaches to others. This certainly does not suggest that the study's findings are meant to be prescriptive. It will be up to each educator to place value judgements on his or her approach versus that of others. At a minimum, the study provides ideas, especially for those teaching the course for the first time or even those institutions planning on adding (or dropping) consumer behavior to (or from) their undergraduate curriculum.

Methodology

Sample

A self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 194 undergraduate four year universities and colleges in the United States identified as possessing either Business or Administrative Science departments.[1] Selection of schools for the mailout was made by using a quota sampling procedure. Thus, states such as California and Ohio had proportionately more schools selected as sample units. Questionnaires were mailed to department heads who were asked to forward the instrument to the instructor mainly responsible for the teaching of that department's consumer behavior course. If no such course was offered, the department head was instructed to answer questions intended to reveal why this was true.

Data Collection Instrument

A six-page, pretested questionnaire containing structured and unstructured questions was employed to collect data. Instructors at institutions offering a consumer behavior course were asked to respond to questions covering seven different areas of investigation: a) classroom format, b) use of theoretical models of consumer behavior, c) student task requirements, d) required course materials, e) special skill requirements, f) evaluation of student performance and g) suggestions for improving the consumer behavior course.

Classroom formats. Instructors were asked what percentage of their total classroom time is spent on: lectures, class discussion, case analysis, presentations, films, guest speakers, and other items.

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[1] Using 1977 Lovejoy's Guide to American Colleges and Universities.

Theoretical models. A question was asked to determine whether or not any particular model of consumer behavior is emphasized in class. If so, instructors were asked which model(s) they stress. Instructors were given Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, Howard-Sheth, Nicosia, Markin and "other" models as choice categories.

Student task requirements. One set of questions revealed the degree to which the case method of instruction is used and if so, what the instructor's expectations of students is concerning those cases (e.g., class discussion only, group or individual presentation, etc.). Other questions described the popularity of term papers and student research projects. If research projects were required, instructors were asked to indicate how the information generated in the projects is presented to the class and/or instructor.

Required course materials. Instructors were asked to identify what materials students are expected to acquire and use while enrolled in the course. Titles and authors of basic textbooks were solicited as well as an indication of the types of supplementary materials, if any, that the instructor also requires (e.g., periodicals, government publications, newspapers, etc.).

Special skill requirements. Two questions were asked to determine whether or not instructors require students to use statistical and/or computer analysis of consumer behavior research data.

Evaluation of student performance. Instructors were asked to indicate the weights they attach to specific criteria in determining student grades. The criteria included: written examinations, research projects, term papers, case analyses, attendance, class participation, and "other" items. Expecting that written exams would be a major determinant, the respondents were also asked to describe the format of these exams. They were instructed to indicate what weight is given to true-false, multiple choice, matching, fill-in-the-blank, short answer essay, long answer essay and "other" types of exam questions.

Suggestions for course improvement. Lastly, instructors were given an open-ended question intended to identify what suggestions, if any, they had for future instruction of the consumer behavior course at their institution. In answering this question, instructors were asked to assume that constraints such as time, money, and class size could be overcome.

Results

Of the 194 questionnaires mailed, 104 were returned (53.6%) and 100 found usable for analysis. A total of 76 colleges and universities reported to offer a consumer behavior course. Six different reasons were given by the other 24 institutions as to why they did not offer such a course. As shown in Table 1, the two dominant reasons are insufficient number of personnel and insufficient funds (mentioned 45.8% and 37.5% respectively). However, lack of faculty interest is reported as being a reason in 25% of the cases.

Table 2 presents background information collected from the 76 schools reported to offer a consumer behavior course. First, an overwhelming 93.1% offered only one consumer behavior course. Concerning how long a consumer behavior course had been offered, it was found that 61.4% of the respondents offered a course for five or more years. The largest response category (34.3%) was for seven years and over. The schools were almost equally divided when asked if the consumer behavior course is a requirement for a degree program. Slightly under 56% reported "yes" while slightly over 44% reported "no." For those institutions indicating that a prerequisite existed for the course, a basic marketing course (Introduction to, Principles of, etc.) is required by 91.8% of the respondents. Business statistics is second (19.2%), marketing research third (1.4%) and courses such as introductory psychology, sociology, economics, etc. were given in an "other" category totaling 10.9%.

Table 1

Reasons for Not Offering Consumer Behavior Course

Reason*	Percent of Responses
Insufficient number of personnel	45.8
Insufficient funds	37.5
Lack of faculty interest	25.0
Lack of student interest	20.8
Lack of administrative interest	8.3
Inadequately trained personnel	8.3

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

Table 2

Background on Consumer Behavior Course Offerings

Question:	Percentage:
A. Number of course offerings	
One	93.1
More than one	6.9
	100.0
B. How long a course in C.B. has been offered?	
Less than one year	2.9
1-2 years	10.0
3-4 years	25.7
5-6 years	27.1
7 years and over	34.3
	100.0
C. Requirement for a major?	
Yes	55.6
No	44.4
	100.0
D. Course Prerequisites*	
Principles/Introduction to Marketing	91.8
Business Statistics	19.2
Marketing Research	1.4
Other	10.9

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

Consumer behavior instructors exhibit a heavy reliance on the lecture as their main classroom format. Table 3 shows that instructors spend 52.9% of their classroom time with lectures. Class discussion is second in dominance (25.7% of time), case analysis third (10.0%), and presentation, fourth (7.1%). Very little time (1.4%) is spent with films, guest speakers, or other classroom activities.

Table 3

Classroom Format

Activity	Percent of Time:
Lecture	52.9
Class Discussion	25.7
Case Analysis	10.0
Presentations	7.1
Films	1.4
Guest Speakers	1.4
Other	1.4
	100.0

Table 4 indicates that slightly over two-thirds (67.1%) of the instructors emphasize one or more theoretical models of consumer behavior in teaching their course. For those using a model, the Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell model is an overwhelming favorite with 73.5% of the instructors emphasizing that model. The second most popular is the Howard and Sheth model (40.8%). The Nicosia model is third (13.4%) and Markin's model fourth (8.2%). In the "other" category (4.6%), some instructors mentioned Andreason, Bettman, or their own personal model.

Table 4

Use of Theoretical Models in Consumer Behavior Course

Question:	Percentage:
A. Does course emphasize a particular model?	
Yes	67.1
No	32.9
	100.0
B. If yes, specific model(s) emphasized*	
Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell	73.5
Howard and Sheth	40.8
Nicosia	18.4
Markin	8.2
Other	4.6

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

The student tasks required by instructors in their consumer behavior courses are reported in Table 5. First, 67.7% of the instructors use either actual or hypothetical cases. Second, for those reporting case usage, class discussion of cases is the most dominant student role (82.4%) while individual written reports are second (52.9%); group presentations rank last in the pre-specified categories (27.5%). Less than one half of all respondents require student term papers (48.6%) or research projects (49.3%). Those instructors requiring research projects indicated group presentations to be the most popular (27.2%) student role for communicating results to the instructor and class. Group written reports are the second choice (21.2%), class discussion and individual written reports tied for third (18.2%) and individual presentations fourth (15.2%).

Table 5

Student Task Requirements

Question	Percentage:
A. Actual or hypothetical cases used?	
Yes	67.7
No	32.3
	100.0
B. Student role if cases are used*	
Class discussion	82.4
Individual written report	59.2
Group written report	33.3
Individual presentation	33.3
Group presentation	27.5
Other	8.0
C. Term paper required?	
Yes	48.6
No	51.4
	100.0
D. Research projects required?	
Yes	49.3
No	50.7
	100.0
E. Student role if research projects are used	
Group presentation	27.2
Group written reports	21.2
Class discussion	18.2
Individual written reports	18.2
Individual presentation	15.2
	100.0

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

Of the 76 institutions offering a consumer behavior course, 73 require a textbook. Those not reporting to do so mentioned the use of personal handouts, notes, etc. as a substitute. For those using a textbook, Table 6 shows a popularity ranking among available texts. By far, the two most popular texts are Consumer Behavior, by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (27.4% usage) and Essentials of Consumer Behavior by Block and Roering (24.7% usage). Walter's Consumer Behavior is third (12.3%) and a readings text Perspectives in Consumer Behavior by Kassarjian and Robertson is fourth (12.3%). Over one half (58.7%) of the instructors require other

materials to supplement the textbook. Table 6 shows the types of supplementary materials and their popularity with instructors; periodicals are the most popular with 79.5% of the instructors requiring these to be used by students.

Table 6

Required Materials for Course

Question:	Percentage:
A. Textbooks*	
Consumer Behavior, Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell	27.4
Essentials of Consumer Behavior, Block and Roering	24.7
Consumer Behavior, Walters	13.7
Perspectives in Consumer Behavior, Kassarjian and Robertson	12.3
Others	21.9
B. Supplementary Requirements?	
Yes	58.7
No	41.3
	100.0

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

C. Type of supplementary materials required*	
Periodicals	79.5
Research reports	50.0
Books	40.9
Newspapers	18.2
Government publications	15.9
Other	16.2

*Respondents asked to "check all that apply."

In general, few instructors require what might be called special skills from their students. As shown in Table 7, 34.3% require statistical analysis with only 17.1% requiring computer analysis of research data.

Table 7

Special Skill Requirements

Question:	Percentage:
A. Statistical analysis of research data?	
Yes	34.3
No	65.7
	100.0
B. Computer analysis of research data?	
Yes	17.1
No	82.9
	100.0

The basis by which instructors evaluate student performance is displayed in Table 8. The heaviest weight in determining a final grade is student performance on written examinations. This performance represents 62.5% of the final grade. Second in importance is term papers (11.3%) with research projects, case analysis, and class participation contributing a much smaller weight (8.5, 8.3, and 7.8% respectively). The second part of Table 8 also displays the format of written examinations given to students. The item which dominates the written exam is a "long" type of essay question. On the average, instructors indicate this comprises 35.4% of their exams. "Short" type essay questions are second (28.1%). This gives essay questions a major role in exam formats (total weight = 62.5%). The only other exam item ranking high is multiple-choice questions which were reported to have a 22.4% weight in the exam.

Table 8

Evaluation of Student Performance

Question:	Percentage Weight:
A. Items for evaluation	
Written examinations	62.5
Term papers	11.3
Research projects	8.5
Case analysis	8.3
Class participation	7.8
Attendance	1.6
	100.0
B. Format of written examinations	
Long essay	35.4
Short essay	28.1
Multiple-choice	22.4
True-False	9.1
Fill-in-the-blank	2.6
Other	1.4
Matching	1.0
	100.0

When asked to suggest improvements for their course offering, responses, as expected, were varied. The following general desires were identified from responses:

(1) A desire for increased use of computer analysis for research projects.
(2) A desire to design projects to aid local business people.
(3) A desire for increased emphasis on consumerism and consumer behavior as it relates to public policy decision making.

Discussion

Approximately one-fourth of the responding institutions did not offer a consumer behavior course. Considering the importance of consumer behavior knowledge to marketing management and public policy decision making, this finding may be cause for concern. One might dismiss this concern by noting that one-fourth of these institutions report insufficient funds and personnel. Granted, this is a real problem, but the responding schools also indicate that a lack of faculty interest in consumer behavior is a major reason for not offering such a course. This lack of interest may well be a problem that could be overcome with marketing education at the graduate level. However, further comments on this possibility cannot be made from this study's findings.

The study also found that consumer behavior was a degree

requirement for approximately one-half of the responding schools. This finding was not specified according to specific major (e.g., marketing, management, general business, etc.) and it is hoped that the consumer behavior course is heavily required in the marketing major curriculum.

The massive use of theoretical models of consumer behavior by instructors is a definite plus for marketing education. Through the models, students may be able to understand proven and hypothesized relationships among the variables that influence consumer behavior. Thus, students are able to see how all the individual "pieces" of behavior (usually the many chapters of a text) fit together. Of course, the models also provide a research framework for students with research interests. The fact that the Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell model and the texts which are based on that model are the preferred choice, indicates favoritism for decision making process models.

A definite degree of optimism for the future teaching of consumer behavior is warranted by instructor suggestions for course improvement. First is desire to design projects to aid local business people. The interaction between marketing education and the "real world" has always been a subject of concern. Both business people and students will benefit as attempts (hopefully) are made to apply consumer behavior knowledge to the market place. Second, instructors have expressed a desire to build more consumerism and public policy implications into their consumer behavior course. From this are three hoped-for results: (1) an increased data base for public policy decision makers, (2) more adequately educated (future) public policy decision makers, and (3) more socially conscious business decision makers.

Summary

This study has identified the role and nature of the consumer behavior course in the undergraduate curriculum at American colleges and universities. Both negative and positive aspects of the current state-of-the-art were found.

The most important purpose of the study was not to judge the findings, but to simply report consumer behavior pedagogies from the viewpoint of those who teach the course. It is now possible for marketing educators to compare and contrast their approaches to that of others teaching consumer behavior. It is hoped that both current and future consumer behavior educators will review this information before designing or redesigning their consumer behavior course.

Reference

James F. Engel, David J. Kollat, and Roger D. Blackwell, Consumer Behavior, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1978).