

# A Marketing Course And The Liberal Arts: Students' Perspective Of Interdisciplinary Relevance

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines students' reflections on how concepts covered in a marketing course are applied to the broader liberal arts curriculum. The objective was to demonstrate when given a chance with an Interdisciplinary Reflection Assignment, students can articulate interdisciplinary relevance. The study collected sample data from six classes over three years. The assignment embodies the areas of metacognition, reflection, and integration of interdisciplinary knowledge.*

*A content analysis approach was utilized to review both quantitative and qualitative data. Students' comments are categorized as follows: 32 in "Humanities & Fine Arts"; 31 in "Natural Sciences & Mathematics"; 93 in "Social Sciences & History"; 6 in "Professional Studies" (College, 2019). The assignment results strongly suggest that, when asked, students can articulate the integration of a business marketing course with other liberal arts subject areas. Thus, demonstrating business has a legitimate place in the liberal arts curriculum. This study contributes to education literature by providing a specific pedagogical example that can be easily replicated by other educators at other higher education institutions. The assignment offers added value to enhance student learning and appreciation of how marketing concepts integrate with other academic disciplines.*

**Keywords:** Marketing; Education; Interdisciplinary; Liberal Arts

## INTRODUCTION

A liberal arts education is grounded in the disciplines of humanities, sciences, and social sciences (AACU, 2019). Business and other areas of professional study are integrated into liberal arts colleges' curriculum. A northwest liberal arts college has managed this integration with the distinctive PEAK (Professional, Ethical, Articulate, Knowledgeable) curriculum. It combines a liberal arts education with a specialization in multiple fields (College, 2018). According to The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, in 2015, "business was the most popular career aspiration for entering first-year college students in America" (Eagan et al., 2016). Students are choosing professional degrees over humanities (Ahlburg, 2019). Making the business area of study valuable to liberal arts colleges for attracting students.

This article provides a brief literature review of a business curriculum in the liberal arts context followed by the explanation of an interdisciplinary reflection writing assignment. Through this reflective writing, students were asked to articulate the connection they perceived between a marketing course and other liberal arts disciplines. Data was collected over three years, and the results are provided, both qualitative and quantitative, regarding how students see the application of a business-marketing course to the liberal arts.

## LIBERAL ARTS, BUSINESS AND MARKETING CURRICULUM

A comprehensive liberal arts education will serve students well as they enter an ever-changing job market. By design, "a liberal arts education provides students both breadth and depth of knowledge" (AACU, 2019).

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) embraces a very broad, inclusive definition of a liberal education:

“Liberal Education: An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.”  
(AAC&U, 2019)

The tension between business curricula and liberal arts disciplines has been long-standing. “The basic objective of liberal arts education is to establish an institutional ethos and tradition that values the development of the intellectual arts as opposed to professional or vocational skills” (Blaich, Bost, Chang & Lynch, 2004). Rather than focus education narrowly on skill acquisition or a single profession, there is an opportunity to cross barriers and weave knowledge between disciplines. The liberal arts approach asserts that non-professional information can enhance professional competence: for example, Rabuzzi suggested, “that the ways of thinking that are developed in the study of the humanities are essential for the creation and management of knowledge in the information age” (2001).

Marketing is a discipline within the business curricula. This discipline covers a range of topics from pricing, advertising, logistics, consumer behavior, products, packaging, etc. To situate and target information about promotion of products and services to the appropriate audiences, marketing “has traditionally borrowed from other liberal arts-oriented disciplines such as economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and so on” (Bartels, 1988). By the nature of the discipline, “marketing is inherently relevant to the liberal arts education” (Petkus, 2007). The relevance comes from the multidisciplinary approach characteristic of marketing.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY REFLECTION ASSIGNMENT**

Students in the Principles of Marketing, a 300-level course, were asked to complete an Interdisciplinary Reflection Assignment at the end of each semester. The assignment exemplifies students’ use of inquiry and critical thinking. The paper contained two main sections. The first section asked students to identify their major(s) and minor(s) and their motivation for taking the Principles of Marketing course. Instructions for the second section of the paper asked students to pick a major or minor, other than business, and explain how areas studied in marketing overlapped or applied to that major/minor. The students were asked to be specific in writing about concepts covered in the marketing course and reflect on how they could see marketing applied to other disciplines in the liberal arts. The assignment embodies the theoretical areas of metacognition, reflection, and integration of interdisciplinary knowledge.

This metacognitive writing activity was designed to foster students’ interdisciplinary thinking, awareness, and problem-solving. Metacognition generally refers to “the thought or knowledge one has about one’s thoughts” (Flavell, 1976). According to Flavell, metacognition “refers to one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them” (1976). Thus metacognition includes knowing when and where to use particular strategies for problem-solving. The students’ responses demonstrated thoughtful consideration on how strategies employed in marketing have application in other disciplines.

Reflection as part of the marketing course aided students to learn in a more meaningful manner. Students were allowed to express how to weave knowledge they had gained in one discipline with another discipline through reflection. Dewey suggested, “that reflection allows one to be engaged in deep thinking in order to get in-depth meaning of something, converting uncertainty to understanding which leads to action” (1933). Hatton and Smith (1995) suggested a framework with four levels of reflection. The four levels are:

- “Level 1 - Descriptive writing (contains no evidence of reflection)
- Level 2 - Descriptive reflection (a description of events with reflection from one perspective)
- Level 3 - Dialogic reflection (some “stepping back” from events and recognition of alternative

viewpoints)

Level 4 - Critical Reflection (awareness that the same actions and events are viewed in a different way by different individuals)” (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

In evaluating this assignment, the researcher did not grade the students’ level of reflection because the research was interested in content related to other disciplines and not the level of reflection. Achievement of Hatton and Smith (1995) Level 3 or 4 reflection was the intended outcome with more emphasis placed on the content of the written assignment. Dialogic and critical reflection was achieved in all the papers used for the research. This reflective assignment was an integral part of the overall course content. Students completing the assignment demonstrated reflection. “The learner was able to develop a new understanding and view of the information from a different perspective” (Yinger & Clark, 1981). “Reflection plays an important role in an individual’s lifelong learning” (Schon, 1973).

Integration of interdisciplinary knowledge was also a goal of the assignment. “Disciplines provide ‘cognitive maps’ that allow faculty to define the information they process and methods they use to process it” (Petrie, 1976). Disciplinary-based approaches dominate courses in higher education. Breaking down the discipline-based methodology and moving toward an application of interdisciplinary knowledge was the overarching theme of the assignment. “The assertion was that the learner needed to meld or reconfigure knowledge in order to address problems effectively” (Frodeman, Klein, Mitchum, & Holbrook, 2010). “Learning is about creating more appropriate, meaningful responses to a situation that may be problematic, given peoples’ goals and values” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Hopkins says “that learning to integrate, however it is accomplished, helps individuals to improve their ability to deal with recurring or novel situations, i.e., to map contexts and solve problems” (1937). The assignment was designed to advance integrative thinking, learning, and application of the marketing concepts across disciplines, hence the integration of interdisciplinary knowledge.

The overlap and application between the professional studies and liberal arts are at the core of this assignment. The inclusion of this reflection assignment asked students to articulate the relationship between marketing concepts and other liberal arts areas. Metacognition, reflection and, integrative thinking utilized in the assignment facilitated the learning process. In the next section, the data collected, both quantitative and qualitative, reflects the students’ perspectives on the interdisciplinary application.

### **DATA COLLECTION- STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE**

A conventional qualitative research technique, content analysis, was used with 162 student assignments for this research. “Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (Stemler, 2001). Neuendorf briefly defines content analysis as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (2017). “Content analysis is useful for examining trends and patterns in documents” (Stemler, 2001). According to Weber, “content analysis can be a useful technique for allowing researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention” (1990). Krippendorff notes that “much content analysis research is motivated by the search for techniques to infer from symbolic data what would be either too costly, no longer possible, or too obtrusive by the use of other techniques” (1980).

For analysis, the data and student comments were segmented into the four areas of a liberal arts education as defined by a northwest liberal arts college’s PEAK curriculum: “Humanities & Fine Arts, Natural Sciences & Mathematics, Social Sciences & History, and Professional Studies & Enhancements” (College, 2019). Students at a northwest liberal arts college design their combination of major and minor programs across the four PEAK areas (College, 2019). Business courses are part of the Professional Studies & Enhancements PEAK. The marketing course is required for the business major and is an elective in the business minor. Three-fourths of the marketing course enrollment self-reported having a business major or minor and one-fourth of the students were from other majors or minors.

Data from 162 students included comments applying marketing principles to other liberal arts areas as follows: 32 in “Humanities & Fine Arts”; 31 in “Natural Sciences & Mathematics”; 93 in “Social Sciences & History”; 6 in

“Professional Studies & Enhancements” (College, 2019). See Tables 1, 2, 3 & 4 for a detailed breakdown of discipline areas.

**Table 1. Humanities & Fine Arts Data**

<b>Humanities &amp; Fine Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Art & Design	9
Creative Writing	2
Modern & Foreign Languages	7
Music	2
Philosophy	1
Religious Studies	3
Theater	2
Visual Studies	6
<b>Total Comments</b>	<b>32</b>

**Table 2. Natural Sciences & Mathematics Data**

<b>Natural Sciences &amp; Mathematics</b>	<b>Total</b>
Biology	5
Chemistry	1
Environmental Studies	6
Mathematics	4
Physical Education	15
<b>Total Comments</b>	<b>31</b>

**Table 3. Social Sciences & History Data**

<b>Social Sciences &amp; History</b>	<b>Total</b>
Anthropology/Sociology	9
History	9
International Development	1
Political Economy	32
Psychology	42
<b>Total Comments</b>	<b>93</b>

**Table 4. Professional Studies & Enhancements Data**

<b>Professional Studies &amp; Enhancements</b>	<b>Total</b>
Coaching	1
Computer Science	1
Education	2
Journalism	1
Pre-Law	1
<b>Total Comments</b>	<b>6</b>

The following statements are from the students’ reflection papers. These comments were selected because they were representative of other student comments related to the discipline. The comments were coded in groups to represent various disciplines within the four PEAK areas. These reflections demonstrate the application of knowledge by the students from the marketing course with other liberal arts areas. These quotes have no grammar or punctuation corrective editing.

**Humanities & Fine Arts**

Student 1 – The study of marketing can also be applied throughout my French minor. In the principles of marketing course we learned about global markets and the differences in the environmental forces (sociocultural, economic,

political, legal & regulatory, technological, competitive) among nations. My French minor will help me better understand how to market products in foreign countries and communicate with people of different cultures.

Student 2 - I am majoring in Art and there are many areas of marketing that relate to what I have studied in my art courses. Every business has a logo and that logo is its own piece of art. It is important that business products are designed to be desirable for customers. The box/packaging that the products come in also can have an art design or logo of the company. Art is also related to the social media accounts of companies. Most companies have their own web site and their web site needs to be designed to fit the needs and wants of their customers. Art is also related to the advertisements that companies use (Ex- print ads).

Student 3 - Currently in my visual communications course we are learning about the process of making advertisements such as posters and how to visually make them appealing to the person walking by. Visual studies are all about what art is capable of communicating to the viewer, whether that be history, emotions, or a product.

Student 4 - I chose to major in both music and business because a professional musician must have the skills to support his [sic] or herself as a business entity. Many musicians may not realize it but each ensemble they perform with and every album they record is actually a business venture. Furthermore, the reason so many musicians find music to be such a difficult career path is that they do not know how to properly market themselves. Another aspect of marketing that has been helpful in considering the music business is the idea of target market.

Student 5 - As a Philosophy Minor I have had a difficult time connecting what I am learning in class to real work cases; Principles of Marketing has fashioned that bridge. A crucial aspect of marketing is tailoring a product or service to meet the needs and wants of customers. A customer's mental, spiritual, and psychological preferences all play part in whether or not they purchase a product or service. Philosophy helps to understand and sort through those human elements. By combining and overlapping the two studies – Philosophy and Marketing – I have a better understanding of what to expect when creating a service or product and how to interpret and analyze consumer reactions.

Student 6 - I chose to compare my religious studies minor to the marketing class. I feel like marketing principles overlap religion in several ways. The reason being is in marketing you have the 4p's (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) and in religion you use those especially if you have a new church or if you are a new religion. For example, when Luther separated from the Catholic church, he had the new "product" aka a new way of thinking of faith, the "price" being condemned by the Catholic church, the "place" a new church, and "promotion" speak to god yourself and unending forgiveness from God. This is just one example but it in my opinion is very true. In the modern since [sic] I see religion being marketed as a business.

### **Natural Sciences & Mathematics**

Student 7 - In the class Human Genetics a major concept to study is epigenetics (environmental influences will determine what genes are turned on and off). As the public becomes increasingly aware of for example food's and medicine's epigenetic effects on us, pharmaceutical companies and fast-food restaurants will have to rebrand and change their packaging to start fresh and appeal to a changing target market without having to change their products.

Student 8 - Considering my interest in the relevance of research in marketing, I recognize the overlap that marketing has with my studies in mathematics. In the mathematics courses I have completed thus far, I have gained analytical skills in logical reasoning and problem solving as well as the ability to recognize numerical significance when it comes to research. These skills can be extremely relevant to marketing because I can use these mathematical skills when conducting market research to assist in the decision-making process of a company's marketing strategy.

Student 9 - Having a minor in Human Biology, I really see how marketing can be seen in all fields. I took a Biology of Cancer course at C of I. In the course we learned how cancer grows and spreads, but also learned about the research going into a cure. The research programs and companies are constantly marketing themselves to try to get people to donate money to help find a cure. We see these ads everywhere, for example the Jimmy V. Foundation that is huge on ESPN every year.

Student 10 -Environmental studies is an area that is heavily advertised in contemporary society. The “Green Movement” is one that many producers are trying to advertise as a benefit of their product as well as having beneficial repercussions for the environment. One area where this is seen quite often is with cars. The electric car or hybrid cars are so often portrayed as being environmentally friendly and reduce the level of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted in to the atmosphere as well as allowing the customer to feel better about themselves because they have reduced their carbon footprint.

### **Social Sciences & History**

Student 11 - In my Political Economy of Southeast Asia class, we discussed a lot of propaganda and techniques for communicating different political platforms. Southeast Asia is experiencing political turmoil and marketing is essential to each political party.

Student 12 - Since I am a Psychology major, we study a lot about people and fulfilling wants and needs. It surprises me how much I didn't realize business and psychology are related. Especially in marketing when you have to do a lot of research to find out what appeals to people. It reminds me a lot of my social psychology class as well as my cognitive psychology class. In these classes we study memory and how people manage conflict and cooperate with one another. We study schemata as well as heuristics, which are the things that readily available in your head that helps you identify specific objects.

Student 13 - The course of Anthropology/Sociology requires intensive data collection to build theories. This is done through techniques such as participant-observation, fieldwork, surveys, interviews and censuses. Similar to Anthropologists and Sociologists, businesses used the same techniques to gain customer's information in their marketing strategies.

Student 14 - Marketing has provided me with a more in-depth analysis of the effects of advertising techniques in the micro-economic sense rather than just the Political Economy perspective which provides a narrow base of information about how to use consumer psychology to benefit the organization. I think the main part of Marketing that applies to International Political Economy is brand representation and promotion with the inclusion of public relations. If candidates want to win, they need to effectively represent and promote their brand and maintain a successful PR campaign. If presidents want to spark emotion in the people in response to crisis, they must know how to do so through broadcasts and publically displayed information which I think is like the advertisement for the public sphere.

Student 15 - Sociology has ideas that can relate to the four P's of marketing, more specifically distribution or place. In sociology we talk about the distribution of power and resources like homes, and jobs. Usually when we are talking about distribution in sociology, we are mainly looking at inequality and how people are shorted and other has a surplus of resources. Well this is completely relevant to distribution in marketing because you are trying to distribute products and resources evenly, so you don't have surpluses and shortages of products or resources

### **Professional Studies & Enhancements**

Student 16 - Something that I did come to discover throughout this class however was how the concepts that we learned of Marketing can apply to getting a major in Education. Something most people don't think about when it comes to the American Educational System, is the fact that every school in this country is constantly doing works in advertising, public relations, and marketing in general.

Student 17 - Pre-Law is minor that has a lot of overlap with marketing. Many of the concepts that we have talked about such as co-branding, branding, company trade dress transcends and overlaps with law. For example, Pepsi uses the colors blue, white, and red however if they designed their bottle to a solid red color this could create some legal issues as that would possibly invade on Coca Colas trade dress.

Student 18 - Even though I have found similarities of marketing in physical education, I have really noticed how much marketing affects a sports team. I have coached football and basketball in the past, and I will be coaching both



in the future, and I have noticed that a head coach has to market their program to many people. Whether it's a high school team or college team, there are people who are looking at a coach's program from the outside-in. A head coach must market their brand to other coaches who want to coach with them.

The following comment did not fit into one of the PEAK thematic areas. The comment stood out as a general summation of a student's appreciation of the value of a liberal arts education.

Student 19 – If I could sum up what I learned from each major and minor simply, it would be this: health science courses taught me how to decipher important information from which was irrelevant; environmental humanities courses taught me how to read critically, utilize the thesaurus and emphasized the necessity to be aware of historical implications and current events happening in the world politically, socially, and environmentally; and business courses taught me how a person's characteristics and their corresponding actions can influence individuals, communities and companies. I know you were looking for things more specific as pertaining to marketing, but the philosophies and personal growth I've been able to cultivate during my four years here will prove much more valuable than being able to name all the bones in the body or knowing the characteristics of marketing channels. Broader, more marketable skills are more essential to getting hired and contributing to a company. Narrower, more specific competence can be learned as I penetrate more specific job markets.

In summary, these student examples are a representative sample of the students' comments. Only a limited number of comments are offered as examples in this paper. It is the researchers hope these comments provide the students' perspective of the interdisciplinary nature of marketing and other liberal arts courses.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The observations of this assignment suggested that, when asked, students can articulate the integration of content from a business marketing course with other liberal arts areas. Students merely need guidance and an opportunity to express these connections. The students' responses were represented among the four thematic PEAK areas and not limited to only a few disciplines. Observations from the students' comments reflected they were able to find a relationship between marketing concepts to other liberal arts academic disciplines. The researcher found the assignment offered an opportunity for reflection and aided students in recognizing interdisciplinary connections of knowledge.

In future studies, it would be of interest to have the same reflective assignment administered in courses from other disciplines, specifically, how content in other liberal arts disciplines applies to business and other professional studies. The researcher would also like to recommend other business classes, besides marketing, use the assignment to allow students to identify other connections to the liberal arts. This study could also provide insights into student learning in colleges/universities that are not liberal arts institutions.

### **CONCLUSION**

A reflection assignment can enhance student awareness of interdisciplinary connections. For some students, this integration of knowledge may not spontaneously develop unless prompted with a targeted assignment. A college assignment may begin to progress an ethos which can be used after graduation to conceptualize knowledge relationships. In this reflection process, students learn self-discovery to identify their thinking to grow integration between disciplines. This article hopes to demonstrate from students' perspectives the degree to which marketing content is fundamentally relevant to a liberal arts education. Gaining insight into interdisciplinary relationships provides connections that can assist students to make better-informed decisions by integrating a holistic perspective. Ultimately, through these integrated connections, the students can develop into valuable contributors in society, and the workforce.

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