

Nonprofit Course Offerings in U.S. Integrated Marketing Communications Programs

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Abstract: *Integrated marketing communications programs at colleges and universities offer students opportunities to learn strategic methods of promotion. In the nonprofit field, students can utilize their knowledge and skills to impact society, but there are differences between promoting products and promoting causes. This study examines the extent of course offerings with a focus on or inclusion of nonprofit marketing communications content within integrated marketing communications programs in the United States. Findings reveal the potential for institutions to do more to expose students to strategies specific to promoting nonprofit organizations.*

Keywords: *Nonprofit, Integrated Marketing Communications, Education, Curriculum, Course*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, there has been an increasing effort to offer students specialized education in integrated marketing communications. Degrees at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and certificate programs are offered at more than 40 colleges and universities throughout the United States. As students learn what is considered to be a better way to promote products, services, and brands, it is important to know if the differences in promoting nonprofit causes are being considered and whether and to what extent courses covering nonprofit marketing communications are being offered.

Scholars have offered several distinctions that could potentially lessen the effectiveness of traditional strategies for nonprofits. Rothschild (1979) asserts that the differences fall into four categories—product, pricing, involvement and segmentation—and include not being able to communicate a consumer benefit, not having a “product” to show in advertising and the need to appeal to a large, diverse audience. Lovelock and Weinberg (1983) agree that nonprofits must contend with the challenges of having multiple publics and offering services rather goods, and add that they face public scrutiny more than for-profit businesses because of the nature of their work.

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play significant roles in society, providing services, education, entertainment and advocacy that have local, state, national and international impact. According to GuideStar.com, there are more than 1.8 million NPOs in the United States. On its website, GuideStar breaks them down into the following categories: Arts, Culture and Humanities; Education and Research; Environment and Animals; Health; Human Services, International; Public Societal Benefit; Religion; and Unknown. In each area, there are potentially hundreds of nonprofits addressing similar causes with similar target audiences. That competition makes marketing extremely important for nonprofits and effective marketing communications critical, especially for organizations with small budgets.

As Don Schultz and Heidi Schultz (2003) assert, in a cluttered marketplace “the value of a fully integrated communication systems increases.” Since the 1990s, integrated marketing communications has become the standard approach for marketing promotion as advances in technology have led to more media options, increasing the need to use multiple channels to reach target audiences. As agencies, companies and organizations have adopted IMC, educational institutions have added new course offerings to prepare students to better meet employers’ expectations. While most marketing

communications knowledge can be applied to both for-profits and nonprofits, students who want to pursue a career with a nonprofit are well served by understanding that effectively promoting NPOs can be different from promoting for-profit businesses. Henley (2001) argued that utilizing integrated communications is just as important for nonprofits as it is for for-profits and offered the Smokey Bear and McGruff the Crime Dog campaigns as successful examples of its use.

Studies have looked at the inclusion of nonprofit courses in marketing programs. Following the push by scholars to expand the concept of marketing to include nonprofits, Delene (1981) found that 42 of the 117 marketing departments at colleges and universities across the United States who responded to her survey were offering courses in nonprofit or services marketing by 1978. In a similar survey of marketing departments a few years later, Livermore and Guseman (1987) reported that only 9.6% of the 127 responding institutions offered a course in nonprofit marketing, but that 73.6% tried to integrate it into other courses. While marketing is covered in business schools, integrated marketing communications programs are housed in schools of communication, liberal arts and others, as well as business, and often take interdisciplinary approaches requiring students to take classes in communications and business. None of the research to date has investigated the inclusion of nonprofit-focused content in integrated marketing communications programs. The intent of this study is to fill that gap.

RQ1: What is the prevalence of nonprofit marketing communications course offerings in the curricula of integrated marketing communications programs at U.S. colleges and universities?

RQ2: Is nonprofit marketing communications covered more at the undergraduate or graduate level within IMC programs?

2. METHODS

An online search was completed to identify all colleges and universities with integrated marketing communications programs. For the purposes of the research, “integrated marketing communications” programs includes undergraduate and graduate programs offering degrees, concentrations, emphases, sequences, specializations, or tracks in integrated marketing communication(s) or integrated communications, and “marketing communications” programs for which a form of the word “integrate” is used to describe the nature of the program on its web page. Through reviews of websites, 46 colleges and universities were identified as fitting the criteria (see Appendix A). The following information was collected for each: program name; degree offerings; program web page address; school/department where program is housed; accrediting body; and program contact name, title, email, address and phone number. In cases where a name and/or email was not listed on the website, phone calls were made to solicit the information.

For the first phase of the study, the websites of the 46 colleges and universities with IMC programs were reviewed to identify courses with titles or descriptions containing the nonprofit (non-profit) or not-for-profit. For each course identified with one of the keywords in the title or description, the following information was collected: public or private institution; undergraduate or graduate program; course title and description; whether nonprofit communications was the focus of or included in the course; whether it was an elective or a required course; and course credit hours.

For the second phase, an online survey was created through Qualtrics and an email request with a link to the questionnaire was sent to the individuals identified as program contacts through the website reviews. They included deans, department chairs, and program directors. The survey link was emailed to one individual at each college or university, who was asked to complete the survey or forward the link to the person most knowledgeable about the integrated marketing communications program by a deadline two weeks later. A second email was sent after approximately one week encouraging participation. Five days after the deadline, a graduate assistant made follow-up phone calls to invite individuals to participate.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Website Reviews

Although not originally identified as keywords for the research, course titles or descriptions that contained the words philanthropy, fundraising, and donor were identified during the website reviews and included in the data, because they also indicate course content related to nonprofit marketing

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communications. For the purposes of the study, nonprofit “course offerings” is inclusive of courses with a nonprofit focus and those in which nonprofit-related content is included. Of the 46 colleges and universities in the United States with integrated marketing communications programs, 43% were found to have nonprofit course offerings listed on their websites. Seventy percent of those are private institutions and 30% are public.

3.1.1. Undergraduate vs. Graduate

Sixty-five percent of all 46 institutions have undergraduate IMC programs, and 37% of those listed nonprofit course offerings (see Table 1). Forty-one percent of the institutions have graduate IMC programs, and 53% of those listed nonprofit marketing communication offerings (see Table 2). Three of the 46 institutions have both undergraduate and graduate IMC programs and were included in both categories.

Table1. Undergraduate Nonprofit Course Offerings on Website

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	11	37
No	19	63
Total	30	100

Table2. Graduate Nonprofit Course Offerings on Website

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	10	53
No	9	47
Total	19	100

3.1.2. Nonprofit Focus vs. Inclusion

Forty percent of the 20 institutions with nonprofit course offerings listed courses with a focus on nonprofit marketing communications and 80% listed courses in which nonprofit marketing communications is included. Of the institutions with undergraduate IMC programs, 45% had nonprofit course offerings with a focus on nonprofit communications and 82% had courses in which nonprofit marketing communications was included. Of the institutions with graduate IMC programs, 30% had nonprofit course offerings with a focus on nonprofit communications and 80% had courses in which nonprofit marketing communications was included.

3.1.3. Number of Courses

Thirty percent of colleges and universities with nonprofit marketing communications course offerings listed one course with a nonprofit focus and 10% listed two courses with a nonprofit focus. Fifty-five percent listed one course with nonprofit content included, 20% listed two and 5% listed five. Forty percent of the institutions offered required courses and 75% offered elective courses with a nonprofit focus or nonprofit content. Thirty-six percent of the institutions with undergraduate IMC programs offered one course with a nonprofit focus and 18% offered two courses with a nonprofit focus. Fifty-five percent offered one course with nonprofit content included, 18% offered two and 9% offered five. Twenty percent of the institutions with graduate IMC programs offered one course with a nonprofit focus and 10% offered two courses with a nonprofit focus. Sixty percent offered one course with nonprofit content included and 20% offered two.

3.2. Survey

The second phase of the study included an online survey sent to the person identified as the contact for the IMC program at each college or university. Twenty-four of the 46 individuals sent links to the survey completed it, resulting in a response rate of 52%. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were from private institutions and 42% were from public institutions. Fifty-four percent of the respondents indicated that their institutions have undergraduate IMC programs, 25% indicated that they have graduate IMC programs and 20% indicated that they have both.

3.2.1. Undergraduate vs. Graduate

Participants were asked if their institutions offer any required nonprofit marketing communications courses within the undergraduate IMC program. Four percent responded yes and 79% responded no; 17% indicated that the question was not applicable. When asked if their institutions offer any elective

nonprofit marketing communication courses within the undergraduate IMC program, 42% responded yes, 42% responded no and 16% indicated that the question was not applicable.

The majority of the respondents, 57%, indicated that their graduate IMC programs did not have any required nonprofit marketing communications courses; 43% indicated that the question was not applicable. Regarding elective nonprofit marketing communication courses, 28.5% responded yes, 28.5% responded no and 43% indicated that the question was not applicable.

3.2.2. Nonprofit Inclusion in Other Courses

Participants were asked if nonprofit marketing communications is included in the curricula of other courses within the undergraduate IMC program. Fifty-four percent responded yes, 21% responded no, 8% responded that they did not know and 17% indicated that the question was not applicable. When asked if nonprofit marketing communications is incorporated in a multidisciplinary manner outside of the undergraduate IMC program, 33% responded yes, 33% responded no, 13% responded that they did not know and 21% responded that the question was not applicable.

Forty percent of participants responded that nonprofit marketing communications is included in the curricula of other courses within the graduate IMC program, 20% responded that it is not and 40% indicated that the question was not applicable. When asked if nonprofit marketing communications is incorporated in a multidisciplinary manner outside of the graduate IMC program, 20% responded yes, 25% responded no, 15% responded that they did not know and 40% responded that the question was not applicable.

3.2.3. Number of Courses

Participants were asked how many nonprofit marketing communications courses are offered within the undergraduate IMC program. Seventy-eight percent indicated that one is offered at their institutions and 22% indicated that two are offered. Eight percent responded that one course is offered within the graduate IMC program, and 20% indicated that two are offered.

3.2.4. Changes in Offerings

The majority (60%) of respondents reported that the amount of curricula focused on nonprofit marketing communications had remained consistent over the last five to 10 years. Thirty-five percent reported that it had increased and five percent reported that it had decreased. Growing faculty interest/expertise was reported by most respondents (43%) as the reason the amount of curricula increased, followed by growing student interest (28.5%) and growing community or industry need/requests (28.5%). The sole decrease was attributed to lack of student interest.

3.2.5. Plans to Add Classes

To gauge the possibility of future offerings, the survey asked if there are plans to add a nonprofit marketing communications course. Eighty percent responded no regarding the undergraduate programs, 10% responded that there are plans to add a class in the next two to three years and 10% responded "other" regarding the anticipated timeframe. For the graduate programs, 66.7% responded no, 16.7% responded that there are plans to add a class in the next two to three years, and 16.7% responded "other."

4. DISCUSSION

The number of integrated marketing communications programs has increased over the past 10 years as colleges and universities have expanded their offerings to address changes in the way marketing promotion is done. This study was designed to investigate the inclusion of nonprofit marketing communications course offerings within IMC programs in effort to determine if students are provided opportunities to learn specific strategies related to promoting causes. Two main research questions were asked: 1)Is nonprofit marketing content included in the curricula of IMC programs at U.S. colleges and universities? and 2)Is nonprofit marketing communications covered more at the undergraduate or graduate level within IMC programs?

According to the data in this study, it appears that most institutions with IMC programs are not offering opportunities for students to prepare specifically for positions at nonprofit organizations. Only 20 (43%) of the 46 colleges and universities with IMC programs listed nonprofit communication course offerings on their websites. Eleven (37%) of the 30 institutions with undergraduate IMC

programs had nonprofit courses listed. Survey results were consistent with that finding—one person responded that their institution offers a required nonprofit course and 10 responded that their institutions offer elective courses. That represents missed opportunities for colleges and universities and possibly for students.

The 2016 Nonprofit Employment Practices Survey found that more than half (57%) of nonprofits expected to increase staff compared to 36 percent of private companies. More than a third (37%) of nonprofits surveyed anticipated job growth in marketing/communications/public relations. Searches in July 2017 on the job site Indeed, resulted in 6,667 postings for “nonprofit marketing communications,” 13,053 postings for “nonprofit marketing” and 41,382 for “nonprofit communications.”

The number of courses in the graduate IMC programs was somewhat higher—10 of the 19 (53%) institutions listed nonprofit marketing communications offerings. That is likely reflective of the demand for such specialized learning that many nonprofit professionals find that they need to advance in their careers or to do their jobs better. Based on a survey of nonprofit professionals, Akchin (2001) concluded that many were “accidental marketers,” having come to their positions without degrees in marketing or communications. That lack of education on how to promote nonprofits is likely to make a challenging job even more so. It also can be a handicap for organizations that often survive based on their ability to build and maintain the goodwill and support of the public.

The data suggests that while nonprofit marketing communications is seen as being distinct, it is not perceived as necessarily requiring a dedicated course. Of the 30 institutions with undergraduate IMC programs, 30% listed courses in which nonprofit marketing communications is included compared to 17% with a focus on it. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents indicated that their programs had undergraduate courses in which it was included. At the graduate level, 42% listed courses in which it was included and 16% listed courses with a nonprofit focus. Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents indicated that their programs had graduate courses in which it was included. That indicates that students who may not be considering working for a nonprofit still may be exposed to strategies they may eventually find useful, even working at a for-profit as more companies participate in cause marketing.

The number of courses supports the potential for at least some exposure. While only 30% of the 20 colleges and universities with nonprofit marketing communications course offerings listed one course with a nonprofit focus and two 10% listed two courses, 55% listed one course with nonprofit content, 20% listed two and 5% listed five. However, a key finding is that only 40% of the institutions offer required courses with a nonprofit focus or nonprofit content, while 75% offered electives, which suggests that most students in integrated marketing communications across the country will not take a course in which nonprofit marketing communications is addressed.

5. LIMITATIONS

The colleges and universities included in this study were identified through web searches for institutions with integrated marketing communications programs. Although attempts were made to find them all, it is possible that some may have been missed during that process. There may be programs that teach an integrated approach to marketing communications that do not include a form of “integrate” in the program name or the description on their web pages.

6. CONCLUSION

It has been almost 50 years since Kotler and Levy (1969) asserted that marketing concepts used by businesses could be adapted to benefit nonbusiness organizations. As nonprofits compete for both donations and volunteers, they must have staff that is knowledgeable on how to effectively apply the strategies of integrated marketing communications to promote causes. The data collected indicates that less than half (43%) of the colleges and universities with IMC programs offer courses with a nonprofit focus or nonprofit content, and less than half (40%) of those offer required courses. There are a few more opportunities to take elective courses, which are available at a third of the institutions, and the offerings at the graduate level are better, with 53% of programs (vs. 37% at the undergraduate level) listing courses with nonprofit content, but, ultimately, students at most of the colleges and universities with IMC programs are not given options to prepare specifically for a career with a nonprofit organization. Just as Cyert (1988) asserted that “universities have an opportunity to make a

major contribution to society by educating managers for the nonprofit era,” they also have an opportunity to contribute by educating nonprofit marketing communications practitioners.

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APPENDIX A.

Institutions Included in Study

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| [1] Arizona State University | [16] John Carroll University |
| [2] Berkley College | [17] Keiser University |
| [3] Bryan College | [18] Lasell College |
| [4] City College of New York | [19] Loyola University |
| [5] Duquesne University | [20] Manhattanville College |
| [6] Eastern Michigan University | [21] Marist College |
| [7] Emerson College | [22] Midway University |
| [8] Fashion Institute of Technology | [23] National University |
| [9] Ferris State University | [24] New York University |
| [10] Florida State University | [25] Northwestern University |
| [11] Georgetown University | [26] Notre Dame of Maryland University |
| [12] Golden Gate University | [27] Ohio Dominican University |
| [13] Illinois State University | [28] Pace University |
| [14] Ithaca College | [29] Pepperdine University |
| [15] Jackson State University | [30] Quinnipiac University |

- [31] Roosevelt University
- [32] San Diego State University
- [33] Slippery Rock University
- [34] St. Bonaventure University
- [35] Suffolk University
- [36] Tennessee State University
- [37] The University of Akron
- [38] The University of West Alabama
- [39] University of Houston
- [40] University of Kansas
- [41] University of Mississippi
- [42] University of Wisconsin-River Falls
- [43] Webster University
- [44] West Virginia University
- [45] Wichita State University
- [46] Winthrop University