

# **A JOURNEY TOWARDS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INTEGRATED MARKETING CURRICULUM**

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## **Abstract**

As business school graduates enter the workforce, many of them soon realize that more often than not, businesses are not neatly compartmentalized into departments like management, marketing, finance, accounting, etc. similar to the programs they majored in at business schools that seemed so distinct and different from each other. On top of that, depending on the industry they work at they are required to have the industry specific knowledge to function successfully in their fields; be it film, fashion or pharmaceuticals. They also perhaps find themselves regretting not having paid enough attention to their general education topics which were aimed to make them well-rounded, better integrated students armed with knowledge necessary not only to function as good businesspeople but great ones that have a macro understanding of bigger issues related to their companies and also the complex connections within the business world. The forced division of academic disciplines that does not reflect a realistic world scenario hinders university graduates in general and business school students specifically from becoming better integrated bodies in the workforce. Students often fulfill elective requirements without understanding the purpose and use for them, just to tick them off their worksheets. In this paper, we argue for a need for a more integrated marketing education, one that is integrated better with social sciences, arts and humanities. Based on our own experiences, we describe curriculum changes and give examples of course design and specific projects to encourage academics to think creatively about integrative learning (IL). The first section of the paper provides a description and discussion of IL in general. The following sections describe the processes, procedures and practices that were undertaken at a university in an effort to create a better integrated curriculum with particular emphasis on the marketing department.

## **What is Integrative Learning?**

AAC&U's interpretation of IL is "learning across boundaries," an approach to education that has become "a signature characteristic of a 21st century liberal education" (AAC&U, n.d.). This mode of engaging students and faculty requires different approaches across existing university structures; no longer is learning that occurs in increasingly specialized forms—learning relegated approaches characteristic of single disciplines, for example—adequate to the task of educating citizens in increasingly complex discursive fields of interdisciplinarity. This shift in understanding "generally educated citizens" also produces new forms of administration, oversight, and measurement. As AAC&U notes, "[c]urricular, co-curricular, and pedagogical

innovations call for new forms of cross-cutting faculty oversight to discern the quality and level of students' overall integrative learning. Such oversight is in addition to the responsibility that the faculty already have for the effectiveness of the curriculum in their own departments and across general education" (AAC&U, n.d.).

In the Michigan State "global integrated learning conceptual model," for example, "Integrative Pedagogy" introduces more "ways of knowing" (more perspectives, habits of mind, disciplinary theories)" which enables students to "become better, more reflective thinkers." The reasoning behind this pedagogical theory is that "[c]ulture, history, and positionality influences our worldview; [d]ifferent groups define, frame, analyze, and solve problems in different ways; [b]eing a citizen and scholar means that one must be able to analyze information from multiple frames of reference" (Lucas, 2012). The theory behind the approach is made clear in the articulation of the model itself: "positionality" is re-interpreted as "global" conceptualization; such framing of understanding necessitates the development of multiple, synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning; and this form of coming to a more comprehensive understanding of the world and an individual's place in it is inherently interdisciplinary in nature (requiring an engagement with, and development of, "multiple frames of reference").

The pedagogical model for this form of learning also shifts from the current "stand and deliver," lecture-based classroom approach, to a more facilitative, student-centered set of pedagogical strategies. The emphasis on student learning shifts from the delivery of content that students memorize and regurgitate, to problem-based learning models that engage students in active and experiential learning styles. This demands considerable shifting of the instructors' subject positioning within classes, as well as transference of students' roles from "perceivers" of facts to generators themselves of whatever "content" the classroom experience delivers. Thus, as Michigan State's model identifies, one of the hallmarks of this approach is classroom experience that is "connected, multidisciplinary, and holistic" (Lucas, 2012); faculty function as guides rather than as relatively inert content experts or depositors of (factual) information. However, as Michigan State also recognizes, the version of "intentionality" demanded in this model of teaching and learning requires considerable shifts in the self-reflectivity of instructors and learners alike—that is, this form of "intentionality" often connects students and instructors as co-researchers embedded in real-world problems or issues. This approach to learning requires faculty to abrogate aspects of their "expert" position in favor of increased communication loads with other scholars of differing research backgrounds and founding assumptions; it also requires recognition that multiple disciplines must contribute to both the identification and articulation of

“problems” and the proposal of more complex “solutions.” As Michigan State recognizes, “[f]aculty cannot be an expert in all fields or perspectives on a topic” (Lucas, 2012). The most significant shift in this form of teaching and learning is a pedagogical approach that embeds self-reflectivity as a form of metacognition. As Huber and Hutchings (2009) note, “[w]hat is needed in teaching for integration” is similar “to what is needed in learning: an intentional approach. For faculty, this means systematic reflection on and inquiry into the specific challenges and dilemmas faculty face in the classroom; it means bringing the habits, skills, and values of scholarship to their work as teachers” (Huber & Hutchings, 2009, p. 9). Thus, “intentional learning,” as called for in the Greater Expectations report (AAC&U, 2002), is “key to integrative learning” (Huber & Hutchings, 2009, p. 5). This form of intentionality involves not only shifts in instructors’ and learners’ senses of self in classroom situations, but also requires shifts across university structures—away from the discipline-specific, major-specific, content-driven designs of infrastructural functioning, and toward more inclusive forms of information, skills, research methodologies sharing, as well as an increasing awareness that many other resource allocation strategies (i.e., “cost accounting” features of assigning teaching loads within majors) and contributions must also be re-thought in order to maximize this emergent form of teaching and learning.

### **A Need for IL in Business School Curriculum**

In a 1998 article Walker *et. al.* make a case for more integrative and multi-disciplinary marketing education arguing that the marketing education needs to catch up with the changing complex business environment and the skill sets it demands. Nearly two decades have passed since then and the business world has become even more competitive in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the recession that succeeded it. Walker *et.al.*’s (1998) argument for an integrative marketing curriculum that prepares graduates with multi-disciplinary perspectives to business problem-solving has become even more significant. According to the October 2014 survey by Society for Human Resource Management 40% of the job applicants in the previous 12 months had “critical thinking/problem solving” as an applied skills gap across all industries. Clearly there is a critical need for business school curricula to adopt the key elements of integrative learning. In the following sections we present one university’s journey towards a more integrative style learning starting at a macro university level moving towards micro-departmental level.

### **A Journey Towards Integrative Learning**

The mentioned university in this paper is a small (1700 undergraduate and graduate) students, liberal arts based, non-profit, coeducational, nonsectarian university in the West Coast USA with

a typical class size of 15 students. Atypical of the US college education system, students choose their majors upon admission to the university. All four majors within the business school are designed to be finished in four years with full-time attendance.

### **University level**

The journey toward a more integrated form of delivering courses and student experiences is a long one—and one that emphasizes the iterative nature of the project for re-shaping curricula into greater alignment with AAC&U's vision of a globally aware, generally educated citizen.

Begun in earnest in 2008, Woodbury University's current model of IL is in a transitional phase, with the older "distribution" model, which has fallen short of the "promise" of liberal education, grafted into by the emerging "integrative learning" paradigm. The 2014 Woodbury University catalog is suggestive of this transition from a distribution model (which was found to be lacking in the version of "intentionality" articulated by AAC&U) to a more "intentional" integration of learning and teaching styles across campus.

In 2009 a faculty development day was dedicated to IL and following that a series of workshops with department and program chairs were organized where the concept of IL was discussed more in depth to create a common ground and form collaborations across disciplines and departments to work effectively and efficiently. A series of faculty learning communities was established, and all new faculty continue to participate in this learning community. Among the topics covered in this approach is the need for an awareness of how major learning contributes to, and is in turn completed by, general education (GE) learning. Before embarking on the development and maintenance of this form of faculty training and participation, Woodbury worked under the assumption that students would effectively "transfer" their learning not only in sequenced class content within the majors, but also across the foundational learning they achieved outside the major (in GE classes which emphasized WASC core competency building and co-curricular experiences).

As the proposal for shifting Woodbury University from a distribution model for GEs to an IL model articulates, "[i]ntegrative learning equips students to construct knowledge and action, from making simple connections among ideas to synthesizing learning in new, complex situations. In order for students to realize the benefits of integrative learning, they need to understand that knowledge in all professions relies on the successful application of numerous disciplines and approaches to knowing. Creating a more intentional structure in which foundational general education experiences are reinforced and enhanced in specific major program experiences will encourage each student to develop greater integration of skills across

the diverse experiences that constitute their academic career at Woodbury” (Woodbury University IL proposal).

Another dimension of this process was the incorporation of the integrative learning outcomes (ILOs) with university’s four pillars that had been determined as: Transdisciplinarity, Design Thinking, Entrepreneurship, and Civic Engagement. ILOs are paired with the pillar definitions in order to contextualize both as can be seen here:

- **Transdisciplinarity:** Thinking and acting holistically by bridging multiple perspectives and practices. ILO – Integrate multiple perspectives and practices to develop broadly informed approaches.
- **Design Thinking:** Creating impactful solutions by linking needs and functions to limits and possibilities. ILO – Demonstrate iterative process to create impactful, innovative solutions.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Pursuing visionary opportunities to realize innovative knowledge, practice or product. ILO – Pursue opportunities for growth and success
- **Civic Engagement:** Strengthening communities by actively applying critical knowledge, skills and values. ILO – Apply critical knowledge, skills and values to strengthen communities.

### **Departmental level: An Integrated Marketing Curriculum**

The four departments within the school of business held meetings during which they revised all four curricula to work individually and with each other as well with the university-wide undergraduate majors. These meetings resulted in completely renewed curriculum worksheets for each major that included an increased number of unrestricted electives which gave more opportunities for the business students to take courses outside their disciplines as long as they met the prerequisite requirements. For example, a marketing student, under the revised curriculum, can take an introduction to filmmaking course as an unrestricted elective in addition to her GE courses, which mainly consist of humanities and social sciences.

While curriculum changes are a good starting point, they are by no means sufficient to implement IL. Changes are required to be made at the course level as well. This requires faculty buy in. In our particular example this was a relatively easy task given our small size. Below are a few examples of IL projects facilitated by faculty in various marketing core and elective courses:

- In a media marketing course designed to teach the students to market short films, students teamed with filmmaking and animation students from the same university to market their short films in the forthcoming film festivals.

- Students of a sustainable marketing course acted as the marketing communication agency for the students of an interdisciplinary studies course and created a web site, which included the interdisciplinary course material.
- Principles of marketing students teamed with graphic design students to work on a poster project for the local recycling center.

Due to the small class sizes it was not statistically viable to measure the effectiveness of the IL projects on learning outcomes in the above-mentioned courses. However, anecdotal data based on student evaluations indicate that the students had learning experiences that led them to approach marketing from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Students reported the advantages and challenges of working in interdisciplinary teams on projects that required them to combine knowledge and skill sets from various disciplines. Working with students from non-business majors enabled marketing students to communicate their ideas in a different “language”.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper we argued for a marketing curriculum that is better integrated with other disciplines, in particular with those outside the business school. The fundamental problem lies in the way academic disciplines are classified into distinct taxonomies. A paradigm shift is crucial in approaching a more integrative curriculum design that does not create definite divisions between GE and non-GE courses

We hope that our experiences shared here will help others in their curriculum design and revisions. It has been a long and arduous journey and it is by no means final. We do feel that while we have achieved some significant milestones other important ones lie ahead. One of our biggest learning experiences during this process was the discovery of the discrepancy between our strategic plans and execution of our plans. As we continue on the path towards a more integrated marketing curriculum we realize that commitment and coordination among many levels – faculty, department, school and university – is of utmost importance. This we are finding is easier said than done.

### **References Available Upon Request**