

## Does Marketing Need Better Marketing? A Creative Approach to Understanding Student Perceptions of the Marketing Major

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### ABSTRACT

*Marketing is often used to correct misperceptions and better align them with reality. Ironically, the discipline of marketing itself currently faces a misalignment between negative public perceptions of the field and the reality of marketing's vital role as a business function. The question this study addresses is: does this misalignment carry over to the academic community, and specifically, undergraduate business students? This paper surveys graduating business students, using semantic differential scaling to measure degree of interest and amount of learning in the nine core undergraduate business courses. The paper then focuses on the core marketing course to examine perceptions of both the marketing field and the marketing major. An innovative qualitative technique using word clouds reveals several diametrically opposing associations that students make of marketing (easy/hard, essential/useless, love/hate) both within the group of marketing majors and between majors and non-majors. Given that today's business students will likely become tomorrow's business leaders, this study suggests that the marketing discipline may need to do a better job of marketing itself to create a consistent and positive image of the profession.*

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## Introduction

The year was 1985, and *Rolling Stone* magazine faced a serious problem. The lifestyle periodical that had focused on music and pop culture since its founding in 1967 could not convince media buyers to purchase ad space in their publication. It seems that *Rolling Stone* was perceived as a magazine for Woodstock-era hippies who had no job, no money, and no future. In reality, the readership base was young, affluent, well-educated, and trendy—just the type of audience that should appeal to advertisers. So the ad agency, Fallon McElligott, was tasked with changing perceptions to better reflect reality. The result was the now-classic Perception/Reality ad campaign (See Figure 1). Did the campaign work? In the first year of the campaign, ad pages doubled in the periodical. The following year, ad pages doubled again. In the third year of the campaign, *Rolling Stone* was listed as one of the top ten magazines in the U.S. The campaign ran from 1985 to 1991 and is considered one of the most acclaimed print campaigns of all time (Advertising Age, September 15, 2003).

### Figure 1:

#### *Rolling Stone Magazine's Perception/Reality Ad Campaign*



Source: [www.fallon.com](http://www.fallon.com).

Perception is the way that individuals select and process information to help order and interpret the world around them (Belch and Belch 2014). A misalignment between perception and reality can occur in virtually all areas of contemporary life, and we see examples in everything from politics to popular culture. Perception involves both the reception of stimuli and response to these stimuli. Take the field of academia as an illustration. Students often pick their college major based on perceptions of the field and perceptions of career opportunities. If there is a discrepancy between positive career opportunities and negative attitudes toward the field, the ramifications can be far reaching (Harris et al. 2014).

As was observed in the Rolling Stone example, marketing is often used to correct misperceptions and better align them with reality. Ironically, the discipline of marketing itself currently faces a misalignment between perception and reality. According to the Harvard Business School, "Marketing is critical for organic growth of a business and its central role is in creating, communicating, capturing and sustaining value for an organization" (<http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/units/marketing/Pages/default.aspx>). In fact, marketing is arguably the most important contributor to the sustainability of a business enterprise. It is estimated that at least 25 percent of the civilian workforce performs marketing-related activities. Peter Drucker (1985) has said that "Business has only two basic functions: marketing and innovation." The reality of marketing's significance seems fairly clear.

However, perceptions of marketing often do not reflect this positive view. In public opinion polls conducted by Gallup, marketing, sales, and advertising consistently rank at the bottom of professions on perceived honesty and ethical standards (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654>). Among business disciplines, Kelley (2007) noted that marketing has been called "a bit iffy, unethical, amoral." Smith (2005) called it "the worst offender of the business functions." and perceptions seem to be getting worse. According to a 2004 study by Yankelovich, 60 percent of respondents said that their opinions about marketing and advertising had grown more pessimistic over the years (Smith 2006).

There are many reasons why the public may have negative perceptions about marketing. First of all, marketing tends to be viewed through a very narrow lens. People often equate marketing with advertising or sales. They fail to fully grasp the complex and integrative nature of the discipline. What they see is the annoying ad or the pushy salesperson. Second, because of its intrusive nature, it is virtually impossible to escape the 5,000 ads (Sullivan 2012) that we are exposed to each day. Psychologists recognize that the more familiar we are with something, the more we think we understand it. Who hasn't, on occasion, looked at an ad and remarked, "I could do better than that." So, there is a perception that marketing is just common sense that requires no special skills or training. The media also help perpetuate less-than-desirable portrayals of the profession. One need look no further than books and movies like *The Hucksters*, *Death of a Salesman*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, even the recent television series, *Madmen*. Pop culture depictions of marketing practitioners vary from hapless and bumbling to downright deceptive.

In addition, marketing involves a large amount of creativity, which is hard to reduce to a set of rules or generally accepted practices. It is also a business function that actually draws attention to itself. Unlike accounting or finance, for example, marketing requires the consumer's active involvement (and, by extension, scrutiny) in order to succeed. Finally, marketing is a persuasive tool. It is attempting to change our behavior. And it does that in part by presenting biased and incomplete information. Many people want marketing to be what it is not—purely objective. So, it is not surprising that consumer activists, like Clark Howard or Ralph Nader, often refer to marketing in derisive tones.

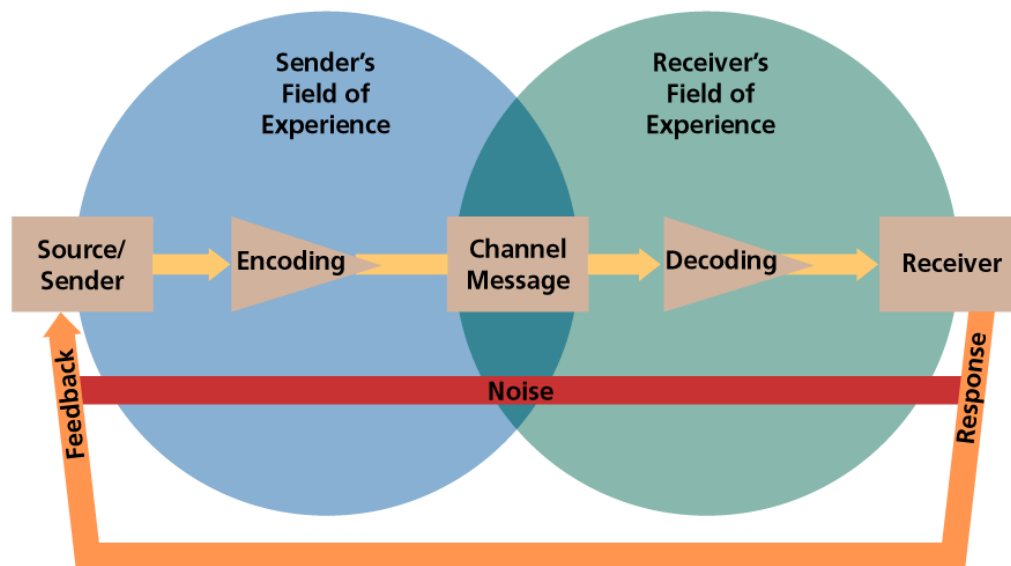
This raises an interesting question: do business students have these same perceptions about marketing as the general public? Many of today's business students will become tomorrow's business leaders. If they have negative perceptions of the value and importance of marketing, this could have far-reaching implications for the future of the field of marketing. Business students have at least one opportunity to get an accurate portrayal of the marketing function—the introductory marketing course. This core course may influence student perceptions of marketing (Pappu 2004), impact their choice of marketing as a major (LaBarbera and Simonoff 1999), influence the marketing major's role identity (Kleine 2002), and exhibit a long-term impact on the student's career and employment opportunities (Kim, Markham and Cangelosi 2002).

The current study was designed to examine the potential misalignment among undergraduate business students in their perceptions of marketing in general and the introductory marketing course in particular. What are the images and associations that students make of this field? How does the marketing core course compare to other core courses in terms of degree of interest and amount of knowledge acquired? If they had it to do all over again, would business students major in marketing? And most importantly, what are the differences between marketing majors and non-marketing majors in their perceptions of this business function?

## Literature Review

Misalignment between perceptions and reality can be conceptualized as a communication failure, and the potential reasons for miscommunication can be examined from a communication process perspective. The communication process framework examines how messages are transmitted from one party to another. Using Wilbur Schram's (1955) classic model, for communication to take place there must be participants--sender and receiver—and communication tools--message and channel. The processes include encoding, decoding, response, and feedback. When effective communication does not occur, it is usually due to noise in the system. Noise could come at every stage of the communication process—e.g., bias from the sender, a poorly crafted message, interference in the channel, or preconceived notions by the receiver. Another contributor to noise is when the fields of experience of the sender and receiver don't overlap. In other words, there is little common ground between the two groups. As a result, the actual message received does not equal the intended message sent, in part because of failure of one party to understand the other. Figure 2 illustrates this framework.

**Figure 2:**  
*A Model of the Communication Process*



Source: Wilbur Schram, *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955). As illustrated in George E. Belch and Michael A. Belch, *Advertising and Promotion*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014).

A logical starting point in assessing the effectiveness of the communication process is to examine receiver feedback, including the receiver's response to the message. What are the receiver's perceptions of the sender? What message did the receiver decode? Did the receiver respond in the desired manner? Did the receiver act on the message? The current study applies this framework to examine student perceptions of the marketing major. In particular, do perceptions vary between marketing and non-marketing majors? If students had it to do all over again, would they consider majoring or double-majoring in marketing? Marketing academicians want the discipline of marketing to be accurately and effectively portrayed to both prospective as well as current marketing and non-marketing majors. Similar to the misalignment between perception and reality already discussed in the overall field of marketing, college students may also have these similar perceptions about marketing. Consistent with communication theory, the current research approach examines the feedback loop in the communication model. The study specifically gathered data from graduating seniors in order to examine their perceptions of marketing as a major.

### Student Perceptions of Marketing

Most of the research on student perceptions of the field of marketing has focused on the area of sales. As has been observed in the field of accounting (Cohen and Hanno 1993), negative stereotypes may contribute to students' level of interest in a sales career. According to Allen et al. (2014), students' perceptions of sales are often formed before they arrive in a marketing or sales class in college. Because of this, the authors recommended that faculty should build relationships with high school teachers and counselors. The authors also suggested that misperceptions may be addressed by work experience and classroom activities that inject more realism into the sales courses. They argued for the need to better understand why students pursue sales courses. Understanding the reasons students enroll in sales classes is important to delivering the type of experience that students are seeking. Historically, students have had a negative view of sales careers, as indicated by Swenson et al (1993). However, Allen et al. (2014) looked at students taking courses in sales and discovered a more positive attitude. Sojka et al. (2000) found that students who were marketing majors and those who had taken two or more sales classes were the most favorably disposed to interviewing for sales positions. Their findings suggest that negative stereotypes of sales careers appear to be less pronounced in these two groups. Bristow et al. (2006) advocate a similar strategy, finding that students who had taken sales classes were more likely to have positive attitudes toward entering sales careers. Swenson et al. (1993) found a negative perception of sales even among marketing students. There was also a decline in marketing students' preference for entry level positions in public relations and retailing.

Perceptions of sales careers may be inversely related to the state of the economy, according to Sherwood et al. (2012). Their findings indicated that females and younger students had more positive attitudes toward careers in sales. They speculate that the reason young people are more positive is that they have lived much of their life in a poor economy. Interest in selling may be countercyclical. Demand may rise when the economy contracts because other entry level marketing options become scarce. One unexpected finding was that marketing students were less interested in a sales career, and the authors speculate that this might be because marketing students realize there are other entry level jobs besides sales. Spillan et al. (2007) found that there were no significant differences between men's and women's perceptions about sales careers, although men indicated a greater likelihood of pursuing a career in sales. They also found that students who majored in business were more favorably disposed toward sales than non-business majors.



## Perceptual Bias Across Business Majors

Several studies have found evidence of perceptual bias among business students with respect to their choice of major. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that students' choice of major is related to how students rate the core course in their major and those of other majors. Siegall et al. (2007) and Tom et al. (1995) discuss the perceptual bias as an ethnocentric perspective common among different majors and that also was found to exist in faculty's opinions as well. Both students and faculty rated their own field as more prestigious than did those in other fields. A similar bias was discovered by Schlee et al. (2007) when they asked students to rate themselves on certain attributes and traits like "creative," "team-player," and "people-oriented." Students from a variety of majors were asked the extent to which each attribute described them "perfectly." Their findings suggest that students across all majors in business have a "self-enhancement" bias. They tended to view themselves more positively than others viewed them. Marketing students were prone to rate themselves as team-players, creative, and people-oriented. They also rated their fellow marketing majors higher on these dimensions, as well. Self-perceptions were found to differ by major. Students majoring in accounting and economics were much more prone to rate themselves as "ambitious" compared to marketing majors. Accounting and finance majors were more prone than marketing majors to claim that "talented in math" perfectly described them.

## Perception, Misperception and Major Choice

How does this perceptual bias influence the choice of a major? Numerous studies have examined undergraduate students' decision to major in a particular field or discipline. A large proportion of this research has concentrated on identifying and weighing the importance of specific factors students use in their decision process (e.g.: Porter and Umbach (2006) and Cebula and Lopes (1982), Montmarquette et al (2002), and Leach and Patall (2013)). More focused research examining factors that influence the choice of a business major is also available (e.g.: Lakhali et al. (2012), Malgwi et al. (2005), Kim et al. (2002), Noel et al. (2003), Roach et al. (2011), and Lowe and Simons (1997)). Finally, several studies have examined the specific factors that influence the choice of marketing as a major. These studies include LaBarbera and Simonoff (1999), Keillor et al. (1995), Hugstad (1997), Pappu (2004), and West et al. (2001).

Students choose an undergraduate major based on perceptions of the "fit" between their skills, abilities and success factors. The better students understand what is required to be successful in a major, the better they can evaluate their self-efficacy. Research on undergraduate major decisions has identified such considerations as aptitude, difficulty, genuine interest, job availability, job security, job salary, social image, etc. Sources of information used in making the decision are also examined in many studies to evaluate the relative importance of parents, professors, peers, high school counselors, etc. The timing of the decision to major in a particular field is often scrutinized, as well. Most college students are required to select a major by the time they enter their junior year. But West et al. (2001) discovered that 23% of marketing majors had made the decision to major in marketing by their junior year in high school. Naturally, there are implications of this early decision-making for marketing departments seeking to recruit majors and promote marketing as a major. Jones et al. (1995) suggest that waiting until students arrive on campus to begin their freshman year is too late to begin recruiting efforts. They describe a program targeting high school students that they implemented to market the marketing major.

To the extent that perceptions of marketing careers are inaccurate, there can be problems. A study by Malgwi et al. (2005) discovered that almost half of students in business schools change their undergraduate major at least once. Making a bad

decision that results in changing to a new major can result in delayed graduation and added expenses, among other negative consequences. The authors concede, however, that a new major might be chosen because it seems to better meet student expectations. The authors found that among senior business majors, 52% did not change their major, 41% had changed their major once, and 7% had changed their major more than once. A study by Swenson et al. (1993) found that students' interest in a sales career had declined over the previous decade. Interestingly, the job attributes that students valued were actually ones that were offered by professional sales jobs. In other words, students did not know that professional sales jobs offered many of the job attributes they sought, so they did not consider selling to be a career option. A similar misperception exists in accounting. Students recognize that quantitative analysis skills are essential to be successful in accounting. However, the same students do not realize that "soft" skills like communication are equally important for success in the profession (Kranacher 2007).

Misperception can lead to a bias in judgment. Misperceptions of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers have been demonstrated to discourage female students from pursuing STEM majors despite their having a proficiency in science (Nix et al. 2015). In accounting, it has been suggested that minority students are underrepresented in the profession because they have misperceptions about the field (Chen et al. 2004). Despite evaluating their introductory course and instructor more favorably than other students in the first accounting course, minority students were shown to perceive more hurdles to becoming a CPA than other students. Chen et al. (2004) speculate that teachers and guidance counselors at the high school level might be contributing to the low proportion of minority majors by directing students to majors other than accounting.

There seems to be abundant evidence, that students can develop incomplete information or inaccurate information in formulating their decision to major in a particular subject. Marketing is considered to be at something of a disadvantage in recruiting top students since students do not take their first marketing course, typically, until their junior year based on AACSB guidelines. Hugstad (1997) suggests that because marketing is taken later in a student's program of study, marketing departments lose students to accounting, since the introductory accounting classes are typically taken during the sophomore year. In addition, marketing may lose students to majors outside of business such as communications, advertising, and public relations. A similar argument concerning accounting's advantage in terms of timing is echoed by Pritchard et al. (2004). They suggest that students who are most comfortable with quantitative analysis gravitate to accounting or finance rather than waiting to pick a major when they discover that their facility with numbers serves them well in accounting. Why wait? Since most students consider their personal strengths when choosing a major, it might suggest that students select accounting based on high performance in the financial and managerial accounting courses. Pritchard et al. (2004) used two tests of mathematics knowledge with undergraduate business majors to determine if performance on the tests was related to major. Not surprisingly, accounting majors outscored the other majors--management, MIS, and marketing--on both tests. Marketing students scored the lowest overall of all four majors.

Mauldin et al. (2000) noted the critical role of the instructor on a student's decision to major in accounting. The authors found that "...of all the people who could be involved in recruiting, the accounting principles instructor plays the most significant role in students' decisions to major in accounting" (p. 145). Cohen and Hanno (1993) also reinforced the importance of providing a positive student experience in the principles course. Overall, it appears accounting educators are aggressively talking about recruiting the best students and retaining them as well. Perhaps due to their close relationship with accounting practitioners, they seem more concerned about losing

majors and are designing strategies to fight an apparent decline in students majoring in accounting. While some marketing programs recognize the importance of recruiting good students, it seems to be more the exception than the rule. West et al. (2001) found that the importance of the professor was lower for marketing majors in their decision to choose marketing as a major than it was for non-business students.

### Comparing Student and Practitioner Perceptions

Addressing perceptions is also important because marketing practitioners indicate that students are poorly prepared for entry-level marketing positions. Marketing majors seeking employment in marketing research were found to have a poor understanding of the preparation required for such positions. John and Needel (1989) found that practitioners in research firms, advertising agencies and other marketing firms rated students poorly prepared for entry-level positions in research. Marketing students were judged as not having taken the proper courses, not having the necessary skills, and not having the kinds of internships that practitioners expected. O'Brien and Deans (1995) and McDaniel and White (1993) present findings indicating that marketing students do not have a clear understanding of the skills and attitudes practitioners want in marketing hires. Both studies indicate that marketing students are poorly prepared for careers in marketing based on feedback from marketing practitioners. This has obvious implications for marketing educators because it indicates that students are not receiving the kind of education and training that employers expect students to have when hired.

O'Brien and Deans (1995) conclude that marketing students' levels of practical skills are deficient, and their expectations are unreasonable. They asked students in a first year undergraduate marketing class to define, in response to an open-ended question, what they thought marketing consisted of. The biggest response category (23%) was labeled "no clear idea." The second largest response category (22%) was "selling and advertising." When marketing students were asked about career expectations, 34% indicated a preference for advertising. The overall conclusion by the authors is that there is a mismatch between student perceptions and employer reality.

Recruiters' perceptions of undergraduate marketing majors in terms of their academic preparation have also been examined. McDaniel and White (1993) identified important gaps between criteria used by marketing recruiters and marketing student evaluations on these criteria. The biggest discrepancy was found for "realistic expectations," followed closely by "work ethic," "oral communication skills," "maturity," "planning and organizing skills," "decision-making skills," and "initiative." McDaniel and White (1993) suggest that marketing students do not have the oral or written communications skill levels or the work ethic desired by recruiting companies. Maturity, discipline, and initiative are also in short supply across marketing majors. Finally, student stereotypes of marketing seem to suggest that marketing does not require much in the way of quantitative analysis. It is not unusual to hear students say that they became a marketing major to get away from the numbers. It is well understood that accounting and finance require extensive quantitative analysis, but students don't seem to grasp that quantitative analysis is also a fact of life in most marketing jobs.

So, how accurate are student perceptions of marketing? It seems likely there is a significant issue that is not being addressed in this regard. The present study was designed to begin to fill the void in the perception/reality debate. This exploratory investigation was designed to address three research questions:

1. How does the core marketing course compare in ratings to other core business courses?
2. What is the impact of the core marketing course on student opinions of marketing and the marketing major?



3. How do marketing majors and non-majors perceive the overall field of marketing?

## Method

Data were collected from graduating seniors in the capstone strategic management course at a large AACSB accredited research university in the southeast. The university has an undergraduate enrollment of 32,000 highly diverse students, 33% of whom are black, 9% Asian, and 7% Hispanic. The university is the second largest institution in the state university system. Its business school is the 6th largest in the United States, with approximately 8,000 students, 6,200 of whom are undergraduates. Fifty-three percent of undergraduate business majors are male; the mean age of the undergraduate students is 24.

All instructors in the capstone strategic management course were sent a packet of questionnaires toward the end of the semester and were invited to participate in the study. Participation by both instructors and students was completely voluntary. Students were given the opportunity to complete the survey during class time. To ensure anonymity and protect students' privacy, no demographic questions were asked. A total of 630 students participated in the study, for a response rate of 70 percent. Ninety of the respondents were marketing majors and 540 were non-marketing majors, divided proportionately among the remaining 10 academic units or majors in the business school.

The two-page survey consisted of 23 questions, both close-ended and open-ended. Students were first asked to use a 7-point semantic differential-type scale to rate all of the required courses in the undergraduate business core on two dimensions: interesting versus boring and learned a lot versus learned very little. The next set of questions dealt with perceptions of the core marketing course, whether students took any additional marketing courses beyond the core marketing course, whether the core course changed their opinion of marketing and if so, was it changed for the better or for the worse. Students were then asked if they had it to do all over again, would they consider either majoring or double-majoring in marketing. Finally, and of most interest, students were asked what descriptive words, thoughts, images or characteristics they would use to describe the field of marketing. The resulting perceptions were used to construct word clouds and compare differences in perceptions among marketing and non-marketing majors.

## Results

The first research question focused on how the core marketing course compares to other core business courses. All required courses in the business core were measured on the dimensions of degree of interest and amount of learning. Resulting means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1:**  
*Student Perceptions of Business Core Classes*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Principles of Accounting	3.70 <sup>3</sup>	1.96	2.86 <sup>6</sup>	1.64
Legal Environment of Business	2.69 <sup>4</sup>	1.79	2.61 <sup>6</sup>	1.60
Globalization and Business Practice	3.24	1.86	3.25	1.72
Introduction to Computer Based Information Systems	4.06 <sup>3</sup>	2.11	3.72 <sup>5</sup>	1.92
Principles of Macroeconomics	3.81 <sup>3</sup>	1.91	3.37	1.69
Corporation Finance	3.20 <sup>4</sup>	1.97	1.69 <sup>6</sup>	
Business Analysis	3.44	1.90	3.03	1.75
Managing People in Organizations	3.28	1.86	3.18	1.75
Marketing Management	3.45	1.84	3.28	1.69

<sup>1</sup> 7-point scale, with 1 = Interesting and 7 = Boring

<sup>2</sup> 7-point scale, with 1 = Learned a lot and 7 = Learned very little

<sup>3</sup>Marketing Management course perceived as more interesting,  $p < .05$

<sup>4</sup>Marketing Management course perceived as less interesting,  $p < .05$

<sup>5</sup>Marketing Management course perceived as more learning,  $p < .05$

<sup>6</sup>Marketing Management course perceived as less learning,  $p < .05$

As Table 1 reveals, the business law course was rated as the most interesting, with the introductory computer information systems course rated as the least interesting. The introductory marketing course fell in the middle of the pack. Paired samples T-tests were used to compare student perceptions of the marketing management course to each of the other eight business core classes. As noted in Table 1, the marketing management course was perceived as more interesting than principles of accounting, introduction to computer-based information systems and principles of macroeconomics ( $p = .05$ ). The marketing management course was perceived as less interesting than the legal environment of business and corporation finance courses ( $p = .05$ ). In terms of perceived learning, corporation finance scored the highest, followed by business law. Marketing fared less well, finishing third from the bottom, with the introductory computer information systems course receiving the lowest rating. Paired samples T-tests compared student perceptions of learning in the marketing management course to each of the other eight business core classes. As reported in Table 1, students perceived that their level of learning was lower in the marketing management course compared with accounting, business law and corporation finance ( $p = .05$ ). Students perceived a higher level of learning in marketing management compared with the computer information systems course ( $p = .05$ ).

The next the ratings for each of the nine core courses were examined by comparing ratings from students within the major to the ratings of the non-majors. As expected, majors generally rated their respective core course more favorably than did non-majors. Table 2 reveals that management majors found the managing people in organizations course as more interesting than the non-majors but did not rate it more favorably in terms of learning. Finance majors rated the marketing management course as lower in interest and learning. Marketing majors, rated accounting, information systems, macroeconomics, finance and business analysis as less interesting. They also rated accounting and finance lower in terms of learning.

**Table 2:***Independent Sample T-Tests Comparing Course Ratings of the Major with the Non-Major*

	MKT		ACCT		FIN		MGS		CIS	
	Interest	Learn	Interest	Learn	Interest	Learn	Interest	Learn	Interest	Learn
Principles of Accounting	L <sup>1</sup>	L	H <sup>2</sup>	H			L	L	L	
Legal Environment of Business										
Globalization and Business Practice							L			
Introduction to Computer Based Information Systems	L							L	H	H
Principles of Macroeconomics	L				H		L			
Corporation Finance	L	L	H	H	H	H		L	L	
Business Analysis	L									
Managing People in Organizations					L	H	H			
Marketing Management	H	H			L	L				

<sup>1</sup> L = the major rated the course as lower than the non-major,  $p < .05$ .<sup>2</sup> H = the major rated the course as higher than the non-major,  $p < .05$

Students were asked to rank the marketing management course, compared to other courses in the business core, as at or near the top, about the same as other courses, or at or near the bottom. As revealed in Table 3, 23% gave the course the top ranking; 49%, the middle ranking and 28%, the lowest ranking. While marketing majors rated the course more favorably than non-marketing majors ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 36.3$ ;  $p < .001$ ), over half of the marketing majors did not rate the course at or near the top.

**Table 3:**

*Ranking of Core Marketing Course Compared with other Business Core Courses*

Ranking	Entire Sample	Marketing Majors	Non-Marketing Majors
At or near the top	23.1%	46.7%	18.8%
About the same as other core courses	49.3%	41.1%	50.6%
At or near the bottom	27.6%	12.2%	30.6%

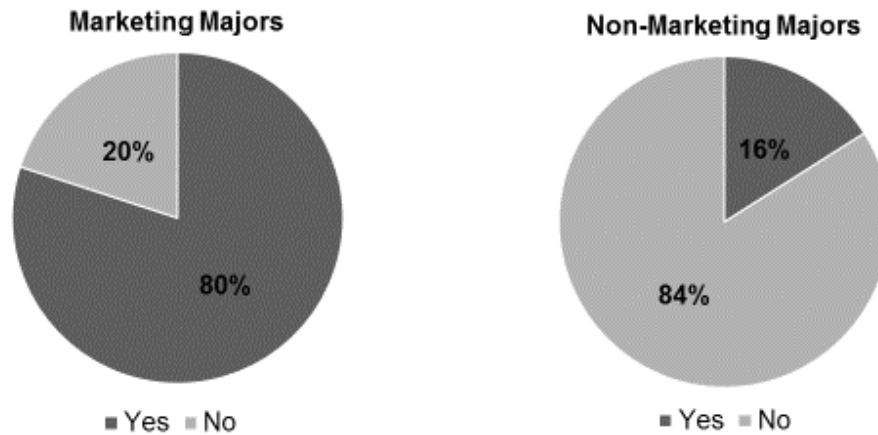
The second research question addressed the impact of the core marketing course on opinions of marketing and the marketing major. Forty-three percent of students stated that the marketing management course changed their opinion of marketing, while 57% indicated that it did not. There were no statistically significant differences between marketing and non-marketing majors. For the students who answered yes, they were asked if the course changed their opinion of marketing for the better or for the worse. Eighty-one percent responded that the course changed their opinion for the better, with 19% indicating that the course changed their opinion for the worse. There was no statistically significant difference between marketing and non-marketing majors. Twenty-eight percent of the sample did take marketing courses beyond the core course. There was no significant relationship between whether the course changed their opinion of marketing and the decision to take additional marketing courses.

Students were also given the following question: "If you had it to do all over again, would you consider majoring in marketing?" Twenty-five percent answered yes, with 75% indicating no. Limiting the sample to only marketing majors, 80% answered yes and 20% said no. Marketing majors were more likely to answer yes ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 108.7$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

**Figure 3:**

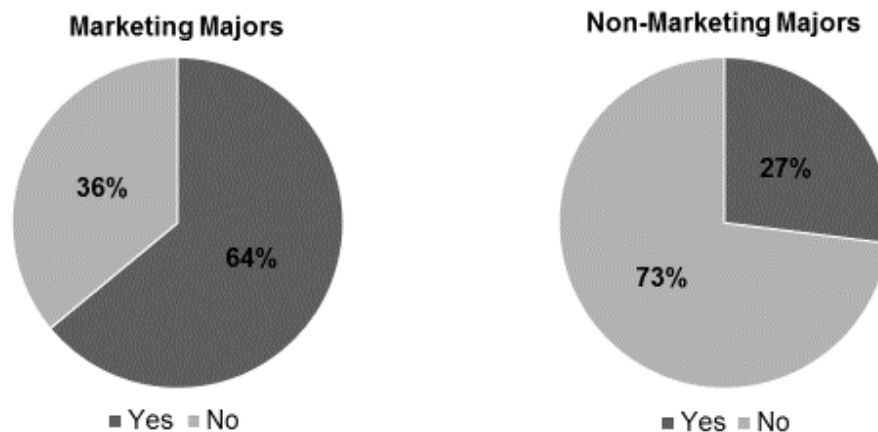
*Differences Between Marketing Majors and Non-Majors If They Had It To Do All Over Again*

**If you had it to do over again, would you consider majoring in marketing?**



\*Pearson Chi-Square Test of Significance = .000

**If you had it to do all over again, would you consider choosing marketing as a double major?**



\*Pearson Chi-Square Test of Significance = .000

Next we looked to see if, for the students whose opinion of marketing was changed by the marketing course, the consideration of marketing as a major would be impacted. The change of opinion did appear to influence the consideration of marketing as a major ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 21$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Students whose opinion of marketing changed for the





public often views marketing as common sense. Other frequently mentioned words, in descending order, were: “great, interesting, love, like, good, important, creative, real world, and broad.” It is worth noting that the narrow lens through which much of the public views marketing does not characterize marketing majors. The words “promotion,” “campaigns,” and “sales” were less prominent than other associations. Another interesting observation relates to the discipline’s efforts to place more emphasis on marketing metrics and accountability. This emphasis does not show up on the word cloud, at least as a positive. There were very few associations of marketing with “metrics” or “quantitative” among marketing majors. The words “jobs”, “paths,” “career,” and “flexible” also are not mentioned frequently. But “versatile” does show up with some prominence. Interestingly, none of the 90 marketing majors mentioned the word “strategic” to describe marketing.

### Figures 5:

#### *Positive Perceptions of Marketing Among Non-Marketing Majors*



Figure 5 presents the positive associations that non-marketing majors have of the field of marketing. The first rather obvious finding is that, despite comprising 86 percent of the sample, non-marketing majors generated less than half the number of distinct words, images, or associations that their fellow marketing majors generated. Non-majors were most likely to use the words “interesting” and “good” to describe the field, followed by “necessary,” “essential,” and “important.” It is worth noting that non-majors seem to view marketing’s major strength as being its essential nature as a business function within the organization. In the midrange of frequencies were words such as “creative, useful, great, fun, and valuable.” Infrequently mentioned were associations such as “cool, relevant, hands on, image, foundation, and double major.”

**Figures 6:**  
*Negative Perceptions of Marketing Among Marketing Majors*



**Figures 6:**  
*Negative Perceptions of Marketing Among Non-Marketing Majors*



Figures 6 and 7 present the negative perceptions of marketing among marketing majors and non-majors, respectively. The most interesting finding here is the diametrically opposing perceptions of “hard” versus “easy” for the two groups. Marketing majors’ major negative association was “hard,” followed by “overly general.” Interestingly, “easy” was also an association of majors, along with “basic, let down, and useless.” Among the less frequently mentioned negative associations by majors were “low salaries, wanting, vague, jobless, boring, common sense, too popular, uninteresting, and meh.”

Non-marketing majors overwhelmingly felt that marketing was “not for me.” Other frequently mentioned negative associations were “easy, useless, jobless, okay, common sense, boring, waste of time, and uninteresting.” A few students listed such unfortunate descriptors as “get rid of it, low ranked, irrelevant, soft, fall back, low salary, and joke.” Reflecting the fact that marketing is the largest major in the College of Business, a few non-majors mentioned “too many students.” Even marketing majors noted this point, with the association “too popular.”

## Discussion

The findings suggest room for improvement and also some approaches to more effectively market the marketing major in the core marketing management course. To the extent that the teachers in this course can create an accurate and compelling portrayal of marketing, several benefits could be realized. The word clouds suggest a potential weakness in terms of the perceived rigor of the major. Positive descriptions from marketing majors (challenging/interesting) contrasted with negative adjectives from marketing majors (hard/overly general). At the same time, some majors negatively described marketing as easy/basic/let down. And, of course, negative descriptors from non-majors included not for me/easy/useless.

Additionally, the marketing management course was rated as average in its interest and below average in how much the student learned. While the marketing management course was ranked about the same as other core courses by 49% of the sample, 53% of marketing majors did not rank the course at or near the top. It seems plausible that these contrasting perceptions might be partially explained by the types of students attracted to the major. For example, it is believed that the marketing major attracts some students who seek a perceived refuge from numbers (LaBarbera and Simonoff 1999) and perhaps less perceived rigor. These students may end up, therefore, struggling in the major. It is also plausible that weak students may lower the level at which marketing courses are taught, holding back the learning of stronger and/or more motivated students (Aggrawal et al. 2007). At the same time, stronger students can certainly find the major challenging and rewarding. To the extent that students hold negative perceptions (such as lack of quantitative analysis or rigor) of the major, marketing will have difficulty attracting strong students who would thrive in the major. In other words, correcting misperceptions among students would, over time, attract stronger students to the major and discourage weaker students from the major. More accurate perceptions of the marketing major should elevate the quality of the students pursuing the major. This logic is consistent with the research finding that students select a major, in part, based on the perceived fit with their skills, abilities, and genuine interest in the field (Malgwi et al. 2005; O’Brien and Deans 1995). Correcting misperceptions will enable prospective students to better gauge the fit of the marketing major with their respective skills, abilities and interests.

A more accurate and compelling portrayal of the marketing major should also create workplace benefits for students and employers. As discussed in the literature review, students may have inaccurate perceptions of marketing careers (O’Brien and Deans 1995; McDaniel and White 1993). A prime example was provided by Swenson et al.

(1993) who documented a decline in students' interest in sales careers but found that professional sales careers offered job attributes valued by students. In this scenario, students may be foregoing rewarding employment and employers would be missing out on productive recruits. One suggestion to improve student perceptions of marketing management is to apply findings from research on the sales course. Of course, sales is part of marketing, but specific approaches to improving student perceptions of selling might be favorably applied to the broader field of marketing. As an example, Cummins et al. (2015) discuss specific techniques, tested in the core marketing management course, to reduce student reticence to a career in sales. A guided presentation by a guest panel of experienced salespeople was the most effective intervention.

McDaniel and White advocate that students would benefit from "shadowing" marketing professionals to get a better understanding of what a particular job in sales, marketing research or retail involves. Keillor et al. (1995) recommend that more marketing career advice and information is needed and more practitioners should be invited to speak. Closer practitioner ties would also equip the instructor to help students better understand best practices (Mauldin et al. 2000). Internships, part-time jobs, hands-on experience with companies either via class projects or student organizations like AMA or SME would be useful. One unique idea to align student perceptions with reality was suggested by Vander Schee (2011): an adaptation of the "Family Feud" game designed to address student misperceptions of marketing.

The word clouds suggest positive elements of the major to emphasize and negative elements to address. As marketers, we need to effectively communicate the key benefits of our major while addressing areas for improvement. It is possible that some courses in the marketing major do lack rigor and would benefit, for example, from more quantitative analysis or critical thinking content.

## Limitations

The findings of this study raise a provocative question and suggest a limitation of the research. Acknowledging that students come into the program with their own preconceived notions about marketing, the question arises--could the differences in perceptions between marketing and non-marketing majors be mitigated by course delivery? In the present study, the core marketing course rated in the middle of the pack among core courses in the undergraduate business curriculum, which is hardly a ringing endorsement. While course content was held constant in this study, it would be interesting in a future study to administer the survey at the beginning of the core marketing course and again at the end and isolate the effect of course delivery.

Another limitation of the present study is that data were collected from just one discipline. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other core courses, i.e., other academic fields. For example, would the results be the same among finance majors and non-majors?

Finally, the study focused on only one university. However, the sample was large and included almost all graduating seniors in the business program. Further, the university from which the sample was drawn is very large and ethnically diverse. Nonetheless, the use of a single business school limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research should expand the scope of data collection to other universities in other parts of the country.

In conclusion, this exploratory study provides data to help marketing instructors better understand undergraduate student perceptions of the marketing major. Like the *Rolling Stone* example at the beginning of this article, the academic discipline of marketing needs to acknowledge a misalignment between perceptions of the field and



the reality of marketing's vital role as a business function. Given that today's business students will likely become tomorrow's business leaders, a realignment of perception with reality is needed to ensure that the marketing profession attracts the best and brightest students.

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