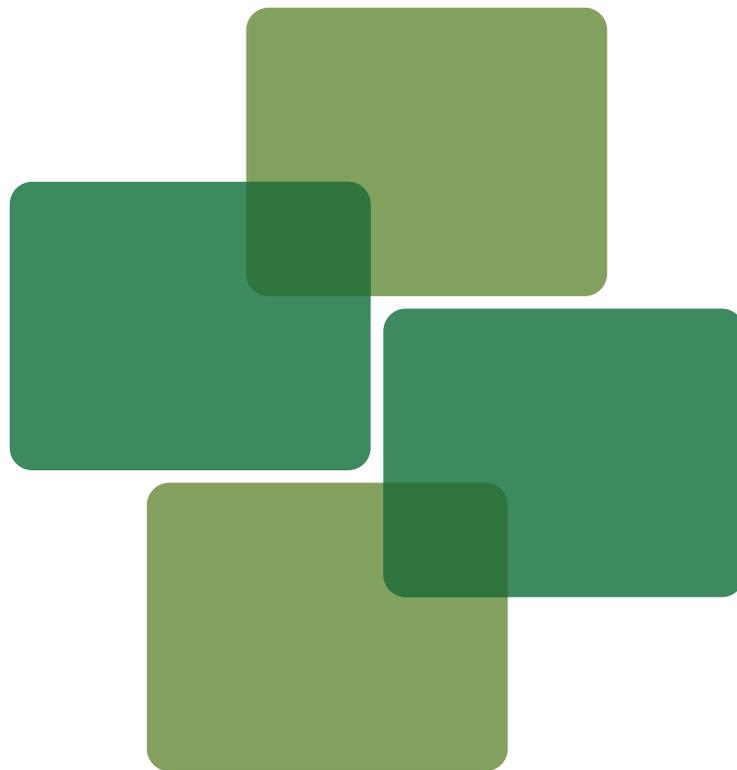# Summer Academe
A Journal of Higher Education

Article

A By-Product of Summer Programs: Student Marketers and Career Readiness

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Abstract

Universities are exploring many models for delivering a fuller term in the summer. The structures and strategies of these differing models are invariably aimed at the same thing: increasing institutional awareness, student enrollment, and, ultimately, university revenue. There is also room for involving students themselves in this endeavor so the institutions benefit from their insight and collaboration, and so the students benefit from on-the-job training that develops the skills that will be prized by their future employers.

This paper provides a descriptive case study that outlines some of the challenges faced when a university shifts from a relatively casual approach to summer term to something more substantive. This story provides an introductory context for a surprising by-product: the professional development of student marketers involved in the strategy.

We lay out employer definitions of career readiness and, through structured interviews, demonstrate how supervised involvement in peer-to-peer marketing enabled students to recognize how they had improved their career readiness while also supporting university enrollment goals. We argue that the evidence here, while not generalizable, offers implications for practice across the academy, and we pose some questions at the end about how this shared win might be developed more thoroughly.

Introduction

What begins here briefly as the story of a medium-sized, private university building out its summer programs turns into an unexpected story of skill development to foster the career readiness of students in the context of a multi-year peer-to-peer marketing campaign. We offer a descriptive case study that

- outlines some of the challenges faced by a new summer program,

- explains a peer marketing process that involves students, and

- explores how the students involved reported greater career readiness as a result of their participation.

Our case study includes a discussion of why this is important for the students and why this has been beneficial for our institution. We recognize that our case study may not be generalizable, but we hope others in early program development recognize similar challenges and see potential for adapting our experience to provide a shared win for students and institutions.

Not all summer programs are the same and they vary from the mature to the new. Mature programs are likely to have supportive institutional structures and processes for yearlong schedules. That's not to say that they haven't got their challenges, but they're likely to be part of the culture of the institution. Newer programs are likely to be fighting for recognition and still trying gain influence with university administrators. There are many models for improving the performance of summer terms. All involve logistical concerns on the supply side—faculty, staff, courses, rooms, and public spaces that remain open during what had previously been regarded as "off-season." And all involve marketing considerations on the demand side—framing the benefits of summer enrollment to students, communicating that message to them effectively, and getting them to commit by enrolling and seeing the course through.

The summer program (Summer Programs) at our medium-sized, private university is in its eighth year as a distinct university-wide unit focusing on summer-term undergraduate enrollment, precollegial young scholars' institutes, and a special diversity initiative for first-generation students from underrepresented communities. It is housed in the Enrollment Services Division of the university, and its half-time director (a full-time, tenured member of faculty) reports to the vice president of the division. This director is supported by a part-time administrative assistant and another faculty member who serves as a consultant/deputy director on a stipend.

For the first few years, the director and staff of Summer Programs focused on shifting the culture of the university with regard to the summer term. This involved many of the logistical concerns on the supply side listed above, all in an effort to create the infrastructure for the summer term to sustain an as-yet negligible demand. Concurrent efforts at creating that demand were early marketing initiatives. This marketing went in two directions. It was aimed in part at the senior administration of the university with a view to convincing the leadership that Summer Programs and a fuller, more developed summer term could be significant for recruitment and retention. It was also

aimed at students, raising their awareness of courses offered in summer term that satisfied degree requirements and reassuring them that summer term could offer an experience that was just as full as any other term.

Our Strategy

From the outset, students themselves were involved in marketing Summer Programs to other students. Far from being solely the objects of the campaign, students became resources. Summer Programs had already begun working more consistently with the university's Marketing Communications Division and consulting with an external marketing firm. Importantly, this early strategy also included the creation of a grassroots internal marketing program staffed and led by undergraduate student marketers.

In the early stages, these student marketing teams set up stations in public areas on campus. They created interest among students at their tables by having small giveaways for those who approached. They also provided information on course offerings and the particular benefits of enrolling in summer courses. They were not responsible for registering students for courses, but they did instruct students on where to find registration information and where to receive proper advice on campus from the advising staff.

Over recent years, our student marketing teams have been given increasing amounts of responsibility to create and direct our annual marketing campaigns. As discussed above, part of the grassroots strategy originated in the production of some typical merchandise (such as hats and pens) that were used as table giveaways in well-trafficked locations on campus. This evolved with our teams' creativity and the location-based approach was put aside in favor of active student engagement. Student marketers would walk through these same popular spots, inside and outside, and give the merchandise away themselves. This garnered more interest, which grew even more as the students began engaging our university mascot to accompanying them.

The student marketing team met with the director and the deputy director of Summer Programs at the beginning of each academic year. Our student-directed campaigns were well planned over a period that commenced slowly in January and increased in intensity from March through May. The dates, times, and locations of all engagement events were agreed upon in advance. The merchandise evolved over the years to include items selected by undergraduate students themselves (such as chip clips, webcam covers, pop sockets, and phone chargers). The team created advertising copy for periodically planned placement in the student newspaper. At the direction of the "lead student marketer" (described below), the team worked with an external marketing firm to design a unique summer logo that branded all the merchandise and brought increasing recognition to Summer Programs. Finally, the student teams worked with our internal Marketing Communications Division to build a social media marketing campaign using comical video stories the teams created, typically staring our university mascot. In 2019, additional peers were

recruited as "marketing minions" to share forward the Summer Programs stories on Instagram, expanding exponentially the virtual peer network.

Starting in 2016, the student marketing team had a lead student marketer, someone who was in their second year of employment with the program. They began as *ordinary* student marketers in their first year and were promoted to *lead* student marketers at the start of their second year. Lead A (let's call him Adam) ran a team that included someone who would become Lead B (let's call her Bethany), and Lead B ran a team that included someone who would become Lead C (let's call him Christian). As lead student marketers, Adam, Bethany, and Christian did more than staff tables. Typically, lead marketers advised on student marketing hires, managed these other student staff, ran and analyzed surveys, participated in university-level staff meetings on summer programs, and contributed heavily to the development of marketing strategies and messages development to their peers. The leads had biweekly meetings with the deputy director of Summer Programs (a faculty member from the university's business school) and met with the director of Summer Programs regularly during each term.

In the final quarter of each lead student marketer's term, they were offered an independent study with the faculty consultant that comprised an additional internship off campus and associated graded coursework.

The off-campus internship was with a local marketing firm that had been hired by the university for much of the higher-level conceptual work in marketing Summer Programs. The lead student marketer attended some morning meetings to learn about the day-to-day operations of the firm, contributed to idea generation, and (in one case) took on a small project for the firm.

To earn credit, the lead marketer completed two tasks:

1. Developing a legacy document for their successor, explaining what had worked and what had not worked in that year's marketing campaign and providing suggestions for programmatic improvement.

2. Participating in an interview in which the faculty advisor pretended to be a hiring manager for a marketing firm and asked questions relating to the relevance of the student marketing experience to a fictional job posting and the value of that experience to a future employer.

Discussion of Student Outcomes

In 2019, we conducted structured interviews with three former lead student marketers to determine the extent to which the experience contributed to the development of their perceived career readiness.

Employers of recent graduates have a very specific view of career readiness. For several years, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has surveyed companies about their priorities in hiring recent graduates, and we based our survey on the 2018 NACE skills inventory.

That inventory shows that employers look for specific skills and relevant experience. The most commonly desired skills (as sought by over 75% of survey respondents) are, in descending order,

- written communication skills,

- problem-solving skills, and

- team skills.

These findings are consistent with surveys by other organizations and researchers. Skills and attributes may vary in order, but familiar suspects are commonly found at the top. The 2015 Hart survey (Hart Research Associates 2015) identified those skills most valued by employers as

- verbal communication (85% of employers),

- teamwork (83%), and

- written communication (82%).

These skills-based priorities often surprise students, many of whom continue the focus developed in high school on earning high grades and on participating in traditional extracurricular activities. (See Rabow, Choi & Purdy 1998 for a three-decade survey of the literature on the primacy of the GPA perspective for university students.) To be fair, these are important considerations for college admissions. Yet, for employers, these rank fairly low. Jones, Phillips and Waikar (2017: 425) found that relevant experiences rank higher than GPA for many employers: *active in student professional organizations* outranks *high grades*. In a list of 21 factors, fortune 500 companies rank *high grades* at 20 and non-Fortune 500 companies rank *high grades* at 19, while *positive attitude*; *respectful of others*; *trustwort*hy, honest, and ethical; *takes initiative*; *cooperative/team player*; *good communicator/interpersonal skills*; *self-confident*; and *critical thinker* are all ranked in the single digits. (See also Clokie & Fourie 2016; Schlee & Karns 2017.)

The Institutional Review Board of our institution deemed the study exempt from review. The student who was then lead D (let's call him Daniel) conducted the structured interviews orally in an informal setting (typically a coffee shop) and recorded the interview on his phone. He asked questions about what the leads had liked about their duties, how their duties had challenged them, and how their duties had prepared them (as seniors about to graduate) for the post-university job market.

We loaded the audio files from the interviews into a qualitative data analysis package for coding keywords related to the NACE job competences. Open coding was less formal and involved listening to the recordings for relevant themes. Emergent categories were managerial skills development, marketing skills development, and general but relevant work experience.

We also provided them with a list of the top 10 attributes sought by employers according to NACE, and we asked them to use a Likert scale to rate how working with Summer Programs had improved their skill proficiency in those areas. Afterwards, we calculated the mean ratings. The top three skills were

- ability to work in a team ($M = 5.0$),
- leadership ($M = 4.7$), and
- verbal communication skills ($M = 4.0$).

Quantitative analysis is limited, given the few observations, but a qualitative analysis of respondents' discussion of these skills in replying to other interview questions is informative.

Ability to work in a team

The ability to work in a team was the respondents' highest ranked development (and uniformly so) despite receiving the fewest mentions in the interviews.

Christian claims, "Managing a team is the most important thing I learned." All three lead marketers cite their roles as liaison among university administrators, student marketers, and external marketing consultants. In addition, Christian highlights his work managing his team internally.

Bethany noted, "Employers look for organization, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Different people operate differently, and as a manager you have to figure out how to talk to people, motivate people, and relate to people."

The ability to work in a team is seen as closely aligned with other skill development, both supporting and supported by leadership and communication.

Leadership

Leadership was the respondents' second highest ranked development and received the greatest mentions in the interviews.

For Adam, leadership skills were developed through practical activities, chief among those was navigating senior leadership while, at the same time, holding those students who reported to him accountable for their results. Adam stated, "Interviewing; setting schedules; building, empowering, and educating my team; and selling a vision were true leadership skills gained." In effect, he describes managing up and managing down by striving for what he calls "internal alignment," or the ability to get the buy-in and support of others in both directions.

For Bethany, the key leadership skill developed was emotional intelligence. She argues that the ability to understand that people operate differently and respond to different types of leadership is essential. In interviews, she is now also able to discuss concrete expectations of professionalism as a result of her experience.

For Christian, some of the key leadership skills acquired when working as the lead student marketer include navigating senior leadership, grounding oneself in the perspective of others, and ensuring there is clear communication at all levels (among students, among staff, and between

students and staff). He mentions, "responsibility of managing a team" was a beneficial leadership skill. Additionally, Christian claims that he is able to use his experience in a "true leadership position" as a talking point in interviews.

Verbal communication

Communication was the respondents' third highest ranked development and the second most discussed theme in interviews.

For Adam, communication skills learned in a communication course could be put into practice: "It wasn't just learning how to talk to people or learning how to sell. Truly, it was the managerial skills of conducting interviews, working with faculty, working with senior leadership on campus, and putting to use the skills I learned in [the business communication course] . . . Navigating senior leadership and being distinct in my messaging are valuable soft skills learned in my experience." He describes being able to draft emails for specific purposes and specific audiences. He acknowledges that communication leads to better organization, and he uses communication in Summer Programs as a talking point during interviews.

Bethany enjoyed "working with university leadership and vocalizing the student perspective."

For Christian, clear communication was essential to good organization and to staying on top of all his tasks. He describes his effort to open the line of communication between himself, as the lead marketer, and his team of student marketers to ensure that their ideas and voices were heard.

Our findings demonstrate two things:

1. The lead student marketers recognize that their paid participation in the program improved their skill set.
2. The skills they developed were consistent with the skills desired by employers.

Ability to work in a team, leadership, and verbal communication figure prominently in the answers provided by respondents in our structured interviews. Respondents articulate skills development and, importantly, are able to describe the context in which they developed their skills. This is advantageous when applying for entry-level positions where the trend now is for recruiters to ask behavioral questions ("Tell me about a time when . . ."). Recruiters are looking for concrete evidence of how applicants have behaved in the past as an indication of how they might behave in the future. The real-life experience lead student marketers have had with situations, tasks, actions, and results gives them a credible narrative for interview questions that address what many employers seek. And the data are clear on what employers seek—they are looking for, among others skills, communication, problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork skills.

Most important, the experience and the articulation of the experience helps students better understand the priorities of their future employers and to align their own priorities more closely. The supplementary internship with the external marketing firm and the interview with the faculty advisor to receive credit help solidify this recalibration. We consider this a student success—they profited from the experience of leading the marketing efforts of Summer Programs and they consciously recognized the details and impact of that experience.

Discussion of Institutional Outcomes

Institutions can also benefit from offering students opportunities such as the ones discussed here in our university's Summer Programs. Higher education is rapidly changing. Summer programs and summer terms are positioned to be a birthplace for the creativity urgently needed for our institutions to thrive in the next era. Part of that progressive innovation includes a student-centric approach that involves the students themselves in both fostering their own career readiness as discussed above and in informing the marketing strategy to promote summer terms. It is a shared win.

For the years covered by this study, undergraduate credit hours increased consistently, albeit modestly. However, in Summer 2019, we had an impressive 5% increase that earned the attention of the university's senior administration. Of course, there are many variables that contributed to this (such as increased online course offerings and options for general education requirements). However, the Summer Programs team attributes much of the increase to the student-centric marketing approach; students led the creation of the marketing strategy to a market made up of their peers. The years of this study built a strong foundation of peer-to-peer marketing on which the 2019 marketing campaign expanded.

Peer-to-peer marketing is not new. One of the more famous advertisements from the 1980s featured actress Heather Locklear promoting Faberge Organic Shampoo. She liked the shampoo so much she told two friends, who told two friends, who told two more friends, "and so on, and so on, and so on." This campaign was wildly successful and occurred many years before the tools of digital marketing allowed for the spread of word-of-mouth messages in an instant (Precourt, 2014).

The experience of this university's director of Summer Programs is that there is tremendous value in engaging a marketing team comprised of the target market's peers. The undergraduate students who we hope will respond favorably to our marketing campaign are peers of the marketers. As noted earlier, student marketers can

- frame the benefits of summer course enrollment to their peers,
- communicate that message to them effectively, and
- inspire them to purchase the "product" (summer undergraduate classes).

Our experience is that peer-to-peer marketing is an effective strategy for advertising Summer Programs. There is some research to support this experience. Viral marketing is a form of peer-to-peer marketing in which individuals are encouraged to pass on promotional messages within their social networks (Bampo, et al 2008). First coined in 1996, viral marketing has developed with the evolution of social media and digital technology. Today, there are many benefits associated with viral marketing, including the speed of message diffusion, reduced chance of message alteration, and increased intimacy and personalization of the medium for message delivery (Bampo, et al 2008).

Digital networks are a more recent phenomenon in the world of social networks open for viral marketing. There is definitely research interest in better understanding how social influence in these networks impacts consumer demand (Aral and Walker, 2014). Some recent experiments have demonstrated a role for peer influence in product adoption (Aral and Walker, 2011). Additionally, there is growing research on how to quantifiably measure the impact of peer influence, something that is inherently and historically qualitative (Precourt, 2014).

Aral and Walker (2011) have investigated how firms can create word-of-mouth peer influence and social contagion by designing viral features into their products and marketing campaigns; viral product design is the process of explicitly engineering products so they are more likely to be shared with peers. Our university's Summer Programs are evolving in this way as the students themselves contemplate, for example, what merchandise is best associated with Summer Programs offerings and how to best use social media as a network for communicating messages to their peers about the value of those offerings. There is still much more to learn.

Viral product features include both active personalized referrals and passive broadcast notifications. Aral and Walker (2014) wanted to understand if firms could add viral features in such a way as to create a greater likelihood of sharing with peers and, if so, which features are most effective in inducing peer-to-peer influence. Their study conducted over Facebook concluded that, overall, viral product design features do generate identifiable peer influence and social contagion effects. However, there is still much to be studied, including, for example, the social and structural conditions under which peer influence is strongest (Aral and Walker, 2014).

Conclusion

Our Summer Programs case study outlines some of the challenges faced by a new summer program, explains a peer-to-peer marketing process that involves students, and explores how those students report greater career readiness as a result of their participation. We discuss why we believe this is important for the students and how this has been beneficial for our institution. Moving forward, distinct research and practice questions emerge that might further our collective conversation about better process and outcomes for summer programs and summer terms.

Our findings concerning our lead student marketers showed that the lead student marketers recognize that their paid participation in the program improved their skill set and the skills they acquired were consistent with those desired by employers.

We would encourage the North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS) to explore this further. With this understanding of the skills sought by employers in our undergraduate hires, how can we design students' paid participation in summer programs to address skills development in even more conscious and meaningful ways? For example, our lead marketers reported that they perceived they learned teamwork, leadership, and verbal communication. Other skills, such as written communication, were not explicitly included. How do we ensure comprehensive skill development for our student marketers and how can we assess our success in a multi-year study? Any such study should measure actual student success in finding jobs upon graduation, not just perceptions that assist our students in behavioral interviews.

Our experience adopting a peer-to-peer marketing approach to market Summer Programs was, in our perception, influential over a period of years in increasing demand that resulted in an increase in 2019 summer enrollment.

For the university, there is an opportunity for summer programs and summer terms to learn from the peer-to-peer marketing research introduced here in our case study. For example, in which ways might we better employ viral product design to market our summer programs offerings? And how might we incorporate both active and passive product features in our social media efforts? Finally, we might measure the effectiveness of these creative efforts and share the results in ways that assist our sister institutions in their own marketing efforts that create a shared win for students and institutions alike.

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Biographies

Geneva (Eva) Lasprogata Sedgwick has 20 years of experience working in higher education as a faculty member and administrator. She was the director of Summer Programs at Seattle University from 2017 to 2020 and, in that role, was responsible for undergraduate summer enrollment and pre-collegial immersions, including an emerging transition program for students from underrepresented communities. Sedgwick is passionate about contributing to the creative evolution of higher education.

Sedgwick has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Boston College, a juris doctor from Villanova University School of Law, and a master of laws in international law from New York University School of Law. Her research interests rest at the intersection of human rights and innovative, entrepreneurial business, and education models. She has been recognized nationally for her innovative teaching and for her scholarly work in the areas of employee privacy law and social entrepreneurship. She is published in such journals as the *Stanford Technology Law Review* and the *American Business Law Journal*.

Bryan Ruppert is a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing at the Albers School of Business and Economics at Seattle University. He teaches strategic communication, advocacy, and leadership. His research interests are in management communication and corporate communication. He was a faculty advisor to the directors of Summer Programs from 2013 to 2018.

Zachary Zenteno graduated from Seattle University in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in management and marketing from the Albers School of Business and Economics.

Appendix 1:

Top 10 Attributes
Employers Seek on a Candidate's Resume

Attribute	Percent respondents
Communication skills (written)	82.0
Problem-solving skills	80.9
Ability to work in a team	78.7
Initiative	74.2
Analytical/quantitative skills	71.9
Strong work ethic	70.8
Communication skills (verbal)	67.4
Leadership	67.4
Detail-oriented	59.6
Technical skills	59.6

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers
www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/employers-want-to-see-these-attributes-on-students-resumes/

Appendix 2:

Interview Questions

The lead marketing student conducted the structured interviews orally in an informal setting (typically a coffee shop) and recorded the interview on his phone. Following are the interview questions he asked.

1. What did you like about working with Summer Programs? Dislike?

2. What was the most challenging part of working with summer programs? Least challenging part? Did any of this surprise you?

3. Has your time with summer programs prepared you for employment? If you have been employed since your time with summer programs, which skills from summer programs were beneficial in the job search and or in the performance of your job?

4. How did summer programs affect your time management?

5. How has your experience with summer programs affected your job search?

6. What are some mistakes you made working with summer programs?

7. What would you do differently now? Why?

8. What is your main professional takeaway from your time working with summer programs?

9. What skills that you learned with summer programs do employers look for?

10. Do you talk about summer programs when being interviewed? Are you able to use your experience as a talking point during interviews?

11. Below are the top 10 attributes employers look for on a résumé in alphabetical order, according to the NACE Job Outlook 2019 survey. Rate how working with summer programs improved each of the following skills:

    (1 = not at all, 5 = greatly improved)

    - Ability to work in a team
    - Analytical/quantitative skills
    - Communication skills (verbal)
    - Communication skills (written)
    - Detail-oriented
    - Initiative
    - Leadership
    - Problem-solving skills
    - Strong work ethic
    - Technical skills

    Do you have any comments on any of these skills?

12. How did summer programs develop you as a marketer? How did you help develop/ impact summer programs?

13. Is there anything you'd like to go over that I did not ask about?