

## **Competent Graduates or Happy Customers (Response to “U/G Students Exit Competencies”)**

ELMAR Contribution by J. Scott Armstrong  
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Your emphasis on student competencies is admirable. However, my experience, and that of many colleagues, is that such an emphasis has not been well received by university administrators, faculty, or students. It has become common, but unspoken, knowledge that schools typically use end-of-course evaluations to assess only the happiness of their customers. In fact, leading business schools resist developing systems that truly address student competencies.

Many years ago, I sought to improve the skills of my students by researching how people actually learn skills (as opposed to simply absorbing course content) and then applying those findings to my teaching. The results are instructive. Using long-term after-course critical incidents surveys, I found that my students had been much more successful in developing competencies. However, my popularity as a teacher plummeted. I took some comfort from the fact that my experience was not unique. In fact, research indicates that skill-oriented training has negative effects on teacher ratings. *Snapshots from Hell* describes the resistance that MBA students hold for classes based on learning skills (see review in Armstrong 1995) and meta-analyses show that, in general, learning plays no role in student evaluations (see references in Armstrong 1995 and 1998).

Think about your students. How many have learned and can demonstrate techniques for running meetings, listening, using regression analysis properly, or conducting surveys? In one study (Armstrong and Brodie 1994), we found that almost 40% of business school students could not properly calculate Net Present Value; even more were unable to identify when it should be used.

Some business schools have successfully taught competencies. These include: executive programs at the Stockholm School of Economics and at Solstrand; Norway in the 1970s; the MBA program at Carleton University; and the Master of Commerce program at the University of Auckland. In addition, the University of Auckland Business School is currently developing such a program for their new Bachelor of Business Information Management degree about which Rod Brodie can provide details. Perhaps ELMAR contributors can add to this list.

If you decide to assess competencies, I suggest that you test students' competencies at the beginning of the program. Then ask students to set goals to develop additional competencies. Students, perhaps with an advisor, should assess progress periodically through self-assessment (perhaps monthly) and assessment center exercises (perhaps at year end). This could be a worthwhile adventure, and would make for an interesting paper. I am unaware of any such attempts in undergraduate business education.

Bear in mind that you are dealing with a delicate issue and will likely face resistance from administration, faculty, and students. You are trying to change a complex system, and this might require other changes to ensure that you actually end up measuring competencies and not

happiness. You might consider proposing it as a small-scale program, as was done successfully by the LEAD program at the University of Chicago's business school.

To address the issue of competencies is to challenge dogma – not an exercise for the faint of heart. In the 1970s and 1980s, I was punished financially for challenging dogma in my journal articles, classes, and mass media. A comment I cherish, made by a Wharton associate dean, was passed along by a colleague: “Armstrong is the reason for tenure.” Fortunately for me, times have changed. For example, I fear no retribution to my ELMAR contributions as the current Wharton School administration and my colleagues are committed to free academic discourse both in word and action. I hope your school offers the same kind of freedom. You'll need it.

Note: My lists of competencies in advertising, new products, and other areas are provided on the “Educational materials” page at <http://jscottarmstrong.com>

#### References:

Available in full text at <http://www-marketing.wharton.upenn.edu/faculty/armstrong2.html#education>

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