Knacktive: An Interdisciplinary Classroom Experience that Prepares Students for a Career in Advertising by Simulating Real-World Agency Work

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Knacktive, a specialized upper level course, was developed to fill an industry need for applicants who understand competitive, innovative team environments. Knacktive is an advanced, undergraduate course designed to replicate the creative demands and intense teamwork atmosphere of digitally-oriented, professional marketing communications agencies. The course helps to refine the attributes identified by NACE as critical for new hires, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. Students experience a realistic, agency-like atmosphere as they work on promotional campaign plans for an authentic client. Teams conduct research, analyze data, devise strategies, formulate creative tactics, and finally pitch their plan to the client.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, an advertising executive and university alumnus approached the administration about the lack of job-ready college graduates. Soon thereafter, a model interdisciplinary course that worked on a genuine client's marketing problem was proposed to be offered in the spring 2011. The course was to be taught by faculty members from multiple disciplines who could offer the different perspectives of advertising, marketing, graphic design, interactive digital media, public relations, and research, found in a typical advertising agency. Four teams of eight students would be given the client's marketing problem to solve, incorporating an interdisciplinary approach, taking students out of their disciplinary comfort zones in order to develop a more thorough solution. In addition to trying to acclimate upper level, high performing students to agency-style work, faculty realized that this unique course also helped students develop the abilities that employers told the National Association of Colleges and Universities (NACE) were essential in new employees. These abilities, sometimes referred to as the NACE skills, include leadership, abilitiesto work in a team, written and verbal communication skills, and

problem solving, to name a few (Job outlook 2016: Attributes employers want to see on new college graduates' resumes, 2015).

In addition, the advertising industry and other marketing fields have identified several abilities, identified as soft skills, necessary for a successful new hire, as well as a long-term employee. Leadership, problem solving, written and verbal communication skills and working collaboratively are necessities for success (Advertising & public relations skills and talents, 2009; Windels, Mallia, & Broyles, 2013; Coico, 2015; Hook, 2015). "Regardless of the country, industry or job they work in, leadership, the ability to work well on a team, and communication skills - among the package known as 'the soft skills' – are what will make the crucial difference in their career" (Andrews, 2015). "'Hard' skills of analytical and strategic thinking are still important, but soft skills such as oral and written communication, presentation skills, adaptability and the ability to negotiate are becoming increasingly important" (Papac, 2014). Investigation of these soft skills, while also incorporating the identified abilities noted by industry partners, was the impetus for the Knacktive course curriculum. Each class period is focused on specific skills needed to complete the task, often being presented specifically with the client's industry in mind. After presentations by faculty and industry professionals, students are tasked with working in their group to apply the knowledge just presented. By pulling these constituencies together, Knacktive students would have a more dynamic undergraduate experience and the indispensable, and in many cases, unparalleled skills necessary to enter the agency world.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The request by the alumnus challenged the administration and faculty members involved to develop a new delivery method to prepare students. Because, "while majors and graduate degrees were important, the top skills that matter most are leadership, the ability to work in teams, and communication" (Coico, 2015). This led the team to develop two questions:
1. How to prepare undergraduate students, from a variety of disciplines, for the rigorous advertising industry? 2. What skills and experiences will acclimate these students to demands of a dynamic industry?
2. After formulating these two questions, the faculty members were ready to begin work on the project. The first course was scheduled and students were recruited to participate.

REVIEW OF SITUATION

The faculty incorporated the principles of multiple disciplines and developed what would become an ever-changing curriculum to meet the needs of industry professionals. The goal from the beginning was to integrate the majors of marketing, business management, advertising, information systems, computer science, interactive digital media, graphic design, public relations, and journalism into one course, one experience. Although this is how the typical advertising agency works, it was a new concept for academia. In order to mimic the industry, the university had to identify faculty members with the teaching credentials, background experience, and interest in teaching in this model. Faculty members from the school of business, school of computer science and information systems, school of communication and mass media, and department of art were identified to participate. Although students from other disciplines can participate in the course, and the actual faculty members have changed nearly every year, the instruction was grounded in these four disciplines (Our story, 2014).

Developing a curriculum for this course required intimate knowledge of the industry. In addition to several of the faculty members having industry experience, the faculty also utilized several industry professionals to help shape the class deliverables. Through consultation with several agency partners, the Knacktive faculty have modified the instruction schedule, team composition, job responsibilities and position titles. This bond with partners helps not only to provide students with an outstanding experience, but also to prepare them to apply for positions at these same agencies upon graduation. "Despite all the

emphasis in the news about the need for computer software and programming skills, the most important qualities employers seek are basic teamwork, problem-solving and the ability to plan and prioritize" (Adams, 2013). The skills that are identified by these partners not only mimic the needs of strong agency employees, but also the NACE skills of leadership, teamwork, problem solving and communication skills (Adams, 2014).

According to the National Association of Colleges and Universities Job Outlook 2015, the skills most highly sought from new applicants are leadership, ability to work in a team, written communication skills and problem-solving skills (Gray, 2014). For the 2016 Outlook report, four attributes were identified by at least 70% of the respondents as being sought on a candidate's resume: leadership, ability to work in a team, written communication skills, and problem solving skills. Table 1 identifies the two years of NACE surveys and the differences between the two.

Leadership is not only the top attribute on both lists, but also grew in importance from the survey conducted in 2014 (Adams, The 10 skills employers most want in 2015 graduates, 2014) to the 2015 survey. Four out of five respondents indicated that leadership was essential for job applicants (Job outlook 2016: Attributes employers want to see on new college graduates' resumes, 2015). "If employers will gravitate to those with these skills, it is essential to start developing them at the outset of one's college career. While some are natural leaders, others must work at it" (Coico, 2015). According to Andrews, "communication, leadership, problem solving, and strategic thinking skills were the most desired and hardest to find skills" (2015) in recent college graduates.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON BETWEEN NACE JOB OUTLOOK 2015 AND 2016

	2015	2016	Percent Change
Leadership	77.8%	80.1%	2.3%
Ability to work as a team	77.8%	78.9%	1.1%
Written communication skills	73.4%	70.2%	-3.2%
Problem-solving skills	70.9%	70.2%	-0.7%
Verbal communication skills	70.4%	68.9%	-1.5%
Strong work ethic	68.0%	68.9%	0.9%
Initiative	67.5%	65.8%	-1.7%
Analytical/quantitative skills	67.0%	62.7%	-4.3%
Flexibility/adaptability	66.5%	60.9%	-5.6%
Technical skills	62.6%	59.6%	-3.0%
Interpersonal skills	62.1%	58.4%	-3.7%
Computer skills	60.6%	55.3%	-5.3%
Detail-oriented	57.6%	52.8%	-4.8%
Organizational ability	42.4%	48.4%	6.0%
Friendly/outgoing personality	35.0%	35.4%	0.4%
Strategic planning skills	29.1%	26.7%	-2.4%
Creativity	25.1%	23.6%	-1.5%
Tactfulness	23.2%	20.5%	-2.7%
Entrepreneurial skills/risk-taker	18.2%	18.6%	0.4%

Source: (Job outlook 2016: Attributes employers want to see on new college graduates' resumes, 2015; Gray, 2014)

Other factors that also demonstrated importance, such ability to work in a team, communication skills, and problem solving skills have also been identified through other research (Coico, 2015; Advertising & public relations skills and talents, 2009; Andrews, 2015; Hook, 2015; Parekh, 2012). "Advertising is a complex industry. This means people with different skills and abilities must come together to organize, research, strategize, create, produce and sell...The need for collaboration and teamwork further drove demands for skills in interpersonal communication and persuasion" (Windels, Mallia, & Broyles, 2013, p. 24).

SOLUTIONS DEVISED

The Knacktive course is composed of 32 students, divided into four teams of eight. Each team consists of a project manager, strategic planner, public relations manager, interactive/digital manager, copywriter, media manager, art director and graphic designer. The faculty members work with specific positions, and all Knacktive faculty work with the project managers. The course meets for two hours, three times a week, partially for conveying information that is needed for each stage of the process while also building in significant time for the students to work in groups. Because of the nature of the course, competitiveness quickly takes over, which imitates the pressures agencies feel to "win" clients (Our story, 2014).

Created to provide students with an unparalleled experience, Knacktive has the following vision statement: "Knacktive is a selective, advanced, undergraduate, student educational experience at Northwest Missouri State University incorporating through actual client interaction, the creative demands and intense teamwork atmosphere of a technology-oriented, professional marketing communications agency" (Our story, 2014).

Since its inception in 2011, the course has enrolled 174 unduplicated students. Recently, of those 174 students, 160 were contacted through social media and were asked to complete a survey of their perceptions of the program and their abilities compared to students who did not participate in the program. Of the 160 students, 77 students completed the evaluation, a 48% response rate. Of the respondents, 76.6% were either highly satisfied or satisfied with their Knacktive experience.

FIGURE 1
HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR KNACKTIVE EXPERIENCE?
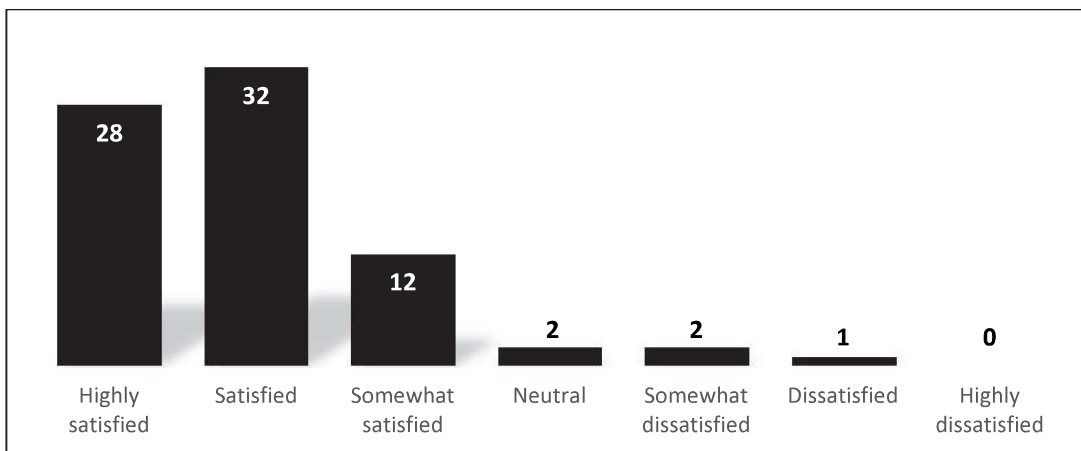
When compared to others on the NACE skills, the students who completed the Knacktive program felt superior on all skills compared to those without the Knacktive experience. Table 2 demonstrates the strength of comparison with peers who were non-Knacktive participants. Accordingly, the skill that was identified as the most advantageous over non-Knacktive alumni was the ability to work in a team ($\mu =$

1.57). While strong work ethic ($\mu = 1.61$) and strategic planning skills ($\mu = 1.62$), were identified as being second and third in importance, respectively. On the other end of the spectrum, technical skills ($\mu = 2.03$) was the only skill listed with a mean rating of over two. On all sixteen measured abilities, the overwhelming majority of responses indicated a significantly better or somewhat better measure over non-Knacktive participants.

Two Knacktive students shared thoughts specifically on leadership. "*I am now a project manager for website development projects. Without my experience in Knacktive, I wouldn't be able to lead such large scale projects with several different departments working on multiple moving parts*" Knacktive 2012 participant. "*I was able to put into a real life situation what I had been learning in class about different personality types and how as a leader you have to learn to adapt your methods to best fit the needs of your team. There were many challenges that helped to push my problem solving skills and build upon my ability to find a solution or seek help when needed. I almost wish I could do it a second semester to see how I could improve*" Knacktive 2014 participant.

TABLE 2
HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR SKILLS COMPARE TO STUDENTS/EMPLOYEES WHO DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN KNACKTIVE?

	μ	Significantly better than peers (1)	Somewhat better than peers (2)	Neutral/ same as peers (3)	Somewhat worse than peers (4)	Significantly worse than peers (5)
Leadership	1.77	29	37	11	0	0
Ability to work in a team	1.57	41	27	8	0	0
Written communication skills	1.95	29	26	20	1	1
Verbal communication skills	1.75	32	32	13	0	0
Problem-solving skills	1.74	30	38	8	1	0
Strong work ethic	1.61	43	24	8	1	1
Analytical/quantitative skills	1.91	28	31	16	1	1
Technical skills	2.03	26	27	21	2	1
Initiative	1.64	38	32	5	1	1
Flexibility/adaptability	1.68	40	22	15	0	0
Interpersonal skills	1.81	31	32	12	2	0
Attention to detail	1.66	40	26	9	1	1
Organizational ability	1.82	35	25	15	0	2
Strategic planning skills	1.62	38	30	9	0	0
Tactfulness	1.82	29	34	13	1	0
Creativity	1.81	34	24	19	0	0

In addition, former students also shared their thoughts on problem solving "*Courses like Knacktive do a better job of forcing students to apply strategic thinking that is needed for most jobs graduates to go out and get*" Knacktive 2013 participant, communication "*communication skills that I developed while in Knacktive have carried over and helped out significantly at my job*" Knacktive 2014 and 2015 participant, and conflict management, Knacktive "*helped me learn how to work in a group, and mostly how to deal*

with conflict. I've learned many things, but this would be the most impactful" Knacktive participant, unidentified year.

To understand the academic composition of the respondents, Table 3 displays their self-identified undergraduate academic major. Survey participants were allowed to identify multiple majors, if that was the case, explaining the total of 94 responses to this question. The most frequent response was Business Management with 22 students, whereas English and Organizational Communication each had only one respondent.

In any one Knacktive class, it is very likely to have up to eight different majors represented and common for teams to have over six distinct disciplines included. The diversity of participants is one of the most important components of the course, because "advertising is an industry that solves ambiguous problems through complex communication solutions. Doing this requires the coordination of bright minds working to examine problems and solve them creatively" (Windels, Mallia, & Broyles, 2013). In an advertising agency, all members of the team, from account managers those in creative positions, work together to meet the needs of the client (Windels, Mallia, & Broyles, 2013). The same is true for a Knacktive team.

In an effort to continue testing the hypothesis that participation in the Knacktive program offers students a more robust education than that of a student completing the traditional coursework in each department, the faculty will be conducting research on non-Knacktive courses traditionally held during the last term of the student's academic career. By collecting this data, comparisons can be made between those who did not participate and those who did.

TABLE 3
MAJORS OF KNACKTIVE RESPONDENTS

Advertising/Applied Advertising	7
Business Management	22
Computer Science	2
English	1
Graphic Design	8
Interactive Digital Media: New Media	6
Interactive Digital Media: Visual Imaging	3
Interactive Digital Media: Computer Science	5
Management Information Systems	2
Marketing	20
Mass Communications/Mass Media	3
Organizational Communications	1
Public Relations	13
Other major	1

CONCLUSION

After six years of the Knacktive program, the faculty have identified some of the key objectives of the experience. These objectives not only meet the needs of the industry partners, but also satisfy those skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Universities (NACE) that are key for a successful job applicant. The participants of the program have provided feedback throughout multiple stages of the program, but some of the best opinions are from those who have applied the skills learned through Knacktive to their current careers. *"It gave me an amazing experience working with a real life company, and figuring out how to meet the clients' needs and wants. Working in a group like this taught me so*

much, and I still use skills I learned within this project in my day-to-day life at work!" Knacktive 2013 participant.

Although the Knacktive program has completed six cycles of working on client's unique problems, it is still being modified continuously to meet the needs of a constantly adjusting industry. Providing these students will skills that are unavailable in traditional coursework, allows them to become a more desirable new employee in the industry. Regardless of the course content or client, Knacktive students have the unique opportunity to practice and refine important NACE skills.

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