Experiential Learning Theory in Digital Marketing Communication: Application and Outcomes of the Applied Marketing & Media Education Norm (AMEN)

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Industry trades report the digital marketing skills gap continues to widen. In response to this need, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and a partnership with a leader in marketing technology was applied to create the Applied Marketing & Media Education Norm (AMEN). AMEN provides a model matching the employment needs of the digital marketing space while creating a means for academic programs to remain current with technology. AMEN also offers unique advantages when it comes to bridging theory-based and skills-based education models through applied projects and software certifications. This produces positive outcomes for the students, faculty, department, university, and industry.

INTRODUCTION

> "Wanted: Executive experienced in data, digital, social, search, media, creative, PR, events, shopper marketing, programmatic, mobile, print and outdoor. The ability to simultaneously and efficiently handle up to dozens of stakeholders (often with competing interests) a must. Successful candidate is skilled at managing up, managing down and balancing a P&L. Old-school thinkers need not apply." (Morrison, 2016)

This quote from *Advertising Age* helps illustrate the changing marketing landscape. Business is moving at a speed of change that makes traditionally valid higher education learning approaches a bit antiquated. Media and marketing communication industry professionals require education to mix theory with skills to create employable, lifelong learners who are ready for careers. The Marketing Science Institute and the American Marketing Association have additionally identified the need for increased marketing measurement as a component of good curricula and research has shown an increase in marketing intelligence courses (Azam & Qamar, 2011). However, even with this increase there is still a void in industry-ready talent and education needs to adapt to a new model.

Significant evidence supports the need for marketing education to adapt. By 2020, companies like Accenture estimate intensified use in digital technologies could add $1.36 trillion to the global economy

(Digital Marketing Institute, 2017). In 2017, Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) published a report finding only 52% of companies rate their digital IQ as strong. Considering that in the previous two years, companies rated their knowledge at 67% and 66%, respectively, the trend is going in the wrong direction (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2017). In 2017, the Digital Marketing Institute also published a study examining the health of digital marketing finding that only 8% of tested marketers had even *entry level* digital marketing skills (Digital Marketing Institute, 2017).

It takes more than strong technical skills to succeed in today's digital economy though. Forrester (2016) stated, "Future business technology employees need the hard technical skills associated with design thinking, data science, and project management, but equally important are those soft skills – communication, empathy, curiosity, and creativity – that can transfer from job to job" (Schooley, 2016, p. 1). In recent years, we have seen an increasing number of employers across industries demanding these deep skill sets combined with the knowledge and ability for critical thought that a broader liberal arts education can provide (Schooley, 2016). This highlights a demand for what is being termed "T-shaped people." With this concept, the broad top of the "T" symbolizes a wide capability for critical thought and adaptability and the straight base of the "T" exemplifies a deep functional skill set (Boynton, 2011).

This "T-shaped" combination is particularly vital for the areas of digital communication, technology, and marketing. Due to the ongoing digital transformation of organizations, the rate of growth in this area of the industry is tremendous, but employers have struggled to meet hiring needs due to lack of qualified entry-level candidates as well as training for current employees. Thus, there is currently a talent shortage for many of these well-paying, highly desirable roles (Angulo, 2016)

In response to this need, some colleges and universities have begun to reassess current curricula to ensure industry needs are being addressed and students can achieve successful job placement post-graduation. As a part of this reassessment, institutions of higher education are working to ensure students develop and can apply the skill sets that industry requires. However, there has been pushback from some (e.g., Baldwin & Baker, 2009; Fish, 2010; Howard, 2011) suggesting that skills-based curriculum moves more to the vocational. Though this may be true for courses that focus only on teaching a specific software or technological solution, the authors believe that application of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) can alleviate this concern as it is intended to "provide a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop" (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001, p. 227) By bringing the same tools students will use in industry into the classroom, and grounding usage of these tools into a theoretically-driven, experience-heavy curriculum, students can readily meet the demands of today's competitive business environment upon graduation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovation in a Real-world Setting

Employers are looking for students who can innovate through critical thinking and problem solving in a real-world setting. The best way to do this is while the student is at the university. Research by Hart Research Associates (2013) done on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities found the following:

- "Nearly all employers surveyed (95%) say they give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that will enable them to contribute to innovation in the workplace. Nearly all those surveyed (93%) agree, "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major." Employers endorse several educational practices as potentially helpful in preparing college students for workplace success. These include practices that require students to a) conduct research and use evidence-based analysis; b) gain in-depth knowledge in the major and analytic, problem solving, and communication skills; and c) apply their learning in real-world settings.

- More than three in four employers say they want colleges to place more emphasis on helping students develop five key learning outcomes, including: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
- In addition to a resume or college transcript, more than four in five employers say an electronic portfolio would be useful to them in ensuring that job applicants have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their company or organization" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p.1).

Clearly, the best evidence for educational outcomes resides in the student's ability to take on real experiential opportunities to learn.
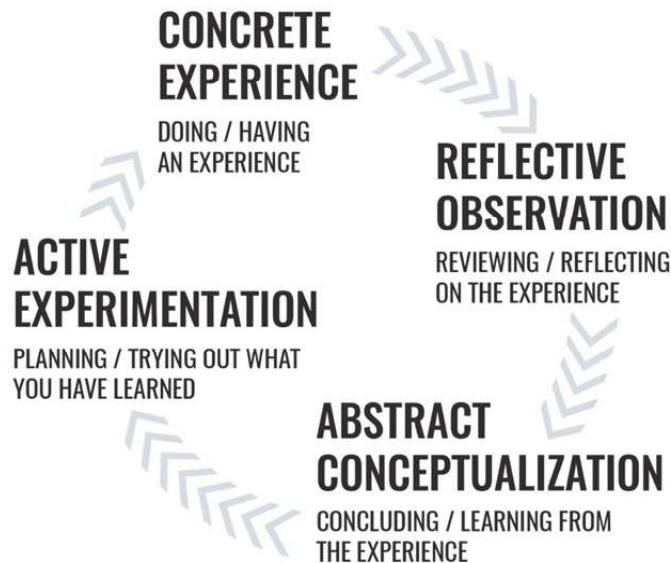
Experiential Learning Theory

"Learning is best conceived as a process" (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, pg. 43). Over the last 40 years, experiential learning theory has been studied and applied in a number of managerial and organizational research studies, exhibiting that learning is at the core of the management process. According to Kolb & Kolb (2008, p. 43), "Experiential learning theory draws on the work of prominent twentieth century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development – notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others – to develop a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience and a multi-lineal model of adult development." There are six propositions that are shared by these scholars:

1. "Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes" (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, pg. 43).
2. All learning is relearning. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner" (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 194)

ELT acknowledges that learning is a process which involves feedback from *experiences*. Within the cycle of ELT, there are stages including: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation- or more simply stated- "experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting" (Kolb and Kolb, 2008, pg. 44). When a learner completes the full cycle repeatedly, they enter what Kolb and Kolb refer to as "deep learning." (Kolb and Kolb, 2008, pg. 49) Further, this type of learning could be considered an application of Mezirow's "transformative learning" which has an inherent focus on what the student already desires to learn and creates more autonomous learners in the learning process (Mezirow, 2000).

In a classroom environment, this would support learning through practice. For example, a professor might first discuss a theory, then demonstrate an application of that theory ("in action") using the same tools that students would find in industry jobs. Next, he or she would ask the students to reflect on application of the theory discussed in their own lives or via a course assignment or project. This application of reflection enhances retention and students will better incorporate what they learn in development of their future professional and civic identities. (Mitchell et al., 2015) Finally, students would directly apply what they have learned- preferably using the same tools the professor used to demonstrate the theory in class. Visualization of Kolb's ELT is displayed in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE
DOING / HAVING AN EXPERIENCE

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION
REVIEWING / REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCE

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION
PLANNING / TRYING OUT WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION
CONCLUDING / LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) goes a step further than this example to remind us that "learning spaces extend beyond the teacher and the classroom. They include socialization into a wider community of practice that involves membership, identity formation, transitioning from novice to expert through mentorship and experience in the activities of the practice…" (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, pg. 48). This means that the "acting" stage of the ELT cycle should ideally extend beyond in-class practice. In the best case, students can put their learning into practice for real-world partners, either in the university or in the community, completing assignments just as they will in their future jobs. This also provides "place-based education" and helps better connect students to the university environment in which they live and work, and the larger community (Smith and Sobel, 2010). Students would then receive feedback from partners that can be used in the next cycle of experiential learning, thus honing their skill set and elevating their performance.

These "key concepts from ELT – the learning cycle, learning space, deep learning and development – can be used to examine management as a learning process at the level of the individual, team, and organization. They can also serve as useful tools to design and implement management education programs in higher education and management training and development" (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, p.63). Research supports the need for this approach as, "… managers on the whole are distinguished by strong active experimentation skills. Business faculty members (and professors in general) usually have the reverse profile" (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, p. 57). Experiential learning theory (ELT) is, therefore, a perfect foundation for housing what will be referred to in this article as the Applied Marketing & Media Education Norm (AMEN).

AMEN Model Activation

As previously discussed, ELT is the theoretical foundation for AMEN. The other major component of AMEN involves our applied industry approach. This is where the academic program creates a partnership with digital marketing business partners to create the experiential learning opportunities. This is an important factor as there are many digital media platforms in the industry and this "real world" experience makes students more marketable upon graduation. These industry opportunities can be on campus with the university as the client or off campus with community or industry partners. In any of these scenarios, the outcome goes beyond the simulation or case study to a full marketing execution. This application of

service learning provides extremely valuable experience as it allows the students to: "draw on multiple theories of learning; focuses on individuals and individual outcomes; encompasses relationships between individuals; targets a broad range of outcomes; and draws on multiple disciplinary perspectives in design, implementation, and application." (Steinberg et al. 2013)

Opportunities to engage industry are helpful to not only the student, but also to the faculty and larger institution, since continuous learning is required with the speed of digital innovation. As previously mentioned, this approach is especially needed as industry moves at a much faster pace than education and as the space between practitioner and educator widens. According to Kim Peretti, former Global Head of Adobe Digital Learning, "Now we focus on building long-term, sustainable learning programs that include self-service, peer-to-peer support, and badged accreditation programs to recognize individuals who have put into practice what they've learned" (Schooley, 2016). In addition, the partnerships benefit the academic institution in both building the strength of the programs and "brand" and potential funding that may accompany these partnerships via institutional and research grants.

A CASE STUDY IN AMEN

The normative model presented here will illustrate how AMEN incorporates ELT and its benefits and is being applied through industry partnerships. Figure 2 provides visualization of AMEN applied in a marketing education context. For this case study, we will use Adobe's Experience Cloud as the industry partner.

FIGURE 2
RICHARDS & MARSHALL'S APPLIED MARKETING & MEDIA EDUCATION NORM
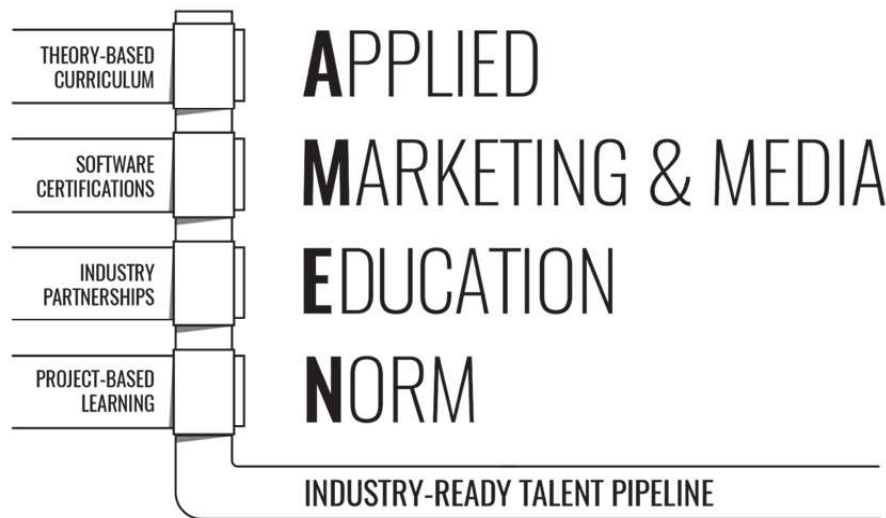
Adobe's Experience Cloud is one of the premier digital marketing enterprise platforms for Fortune 500 customers and companies across the globe. According to the Forrester Wave (2016), "Adobe balances its direct response marketing capabilities with advertising capabilities, and ties them together with insights and its core services offering" (Warner, 2016, p.9). This offers an enterprise level system, capable of handling the vast majority of an organization's marketing needs.

The authors saw an opportunity to apply ELT for the benefit of University programs and marketing goals. In 2016, the University made the decision to pursue an enterprise partnership with Adobe. The partnership allowed the University to do three key things:

1) Integrate Adobe Experience Cloud solutions into curriculum
   - These solutions specifically included Adobe Experience Manager (AEM), Adobe Analytics, Adobe Target, and Adobe Social. More information about the purpose of each tool will be discussed later.
2) Use these same Adobe solutions for University business/marketing needs
3) Allow student teams to apply their course knowledge and gain hands on experience with the tools by completing projects that served both University and community partner needs

The Adobe solutions initially chosen by the University included four digital marketing solutions (AEM, Analytics, Target, and Social). These four solutions were selected for the initial wave of the partnership because of their value in the interdisciplinary academic learning collaborations and to the University as outlined below.

- Adobe Experience Manager is used as a content management system to easily control and update digital content, for example, on a department website or for a product or service focused organization. In the University's application, several University pilots were targeted for initial migration to AEM – all with intentions of using the platform for marketing and teaching purposes. Following successful migration of these sites, a second wave is planned to include the University's homepage, Admissions, and Advancement website sections. Many marketing, advertising and public relations agencies, and Fortune 500 companies use AEM to manage their digital content, and a student who has prior experience using AEM will have a "leg up" when entering these organizations in a digital marketing role.

- Adobe Analytics is another extremely popular digital marketing solution used throughout major organizations to monitor consumers' behaviors across digital properties. For example, Adobe Analytics is incorporated on many websites to understand consumer behaviors on the site and to use this data to make site changes that increase conversion goals (e.g., purchases, donations, sign-ups). Adobe Analytics is also used to "tag" an advertising and/or direct marketing campaign by including small snippets of hidden code in the different campaign components. This allows the analyst to understand which pieces of the campaign are performing best and to make optimization recommendations to the team managing the campaign. In the University's application, Adobe Analytics is used to monitor traffic and usage of the sites migrated to AEM.

- Adobe Target is used for both digital content segmentation and optimization purposes. Target allows for different digital content (for example, different images or text) to be displayed to different user groups based on what is expected to perform best for that segment of the population. Target can also be used to test overall website aspects (e.g., location, size, and color of the search bar, color of a button, navigation wording on the home page) to understand what resonates most with site users. The University plans to use Target for site optimization decisions for those areas migrated to AEM.

- Finally, Adobe Social is used to both monitor social media to understand trends and opportunities and to manage social media content. In the University's application, Adobe Social could help to manage many of the University's social media accounts. Adobe Social can be connected across various platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) so that all social media management can occur in one location. Of note, over time the University migrated from this solution to Adobe Livefyre, which feeds live social media content directly into a department website. This was found to be a better solution for current needs regarding social media, while other solutions such as Facebook Insights or Instagram Insights can be used to monitor social trends.

An important aspect of the enterprise integration of these services is the connections in place between each solution. In an enterprise cloud-based application, a site created in AEM can easily be tagged and visitor behaviors tracked with Adobe Analytics, content can be tested and optimized with Target, and social components integrated on the website with Adobe LiveFyre. Additionally, the enterprise

application allows extension of these services to eventually include all of the University's high priority digital touchpoints.

AMEN and ELT Learning Spaces

To meet the needs of the University and ensure students gained experience in applying these tools, student teams have been created both within current theory-driven courses and in a dedicated practicum final graduate project. These student teams use the knowledge gained in the classroom regarding how to execute strong digital marketing campaigns and apply this knowledge, using the Adobe solutions as well as other partners' solutions, on projects for the University, surrounding community, and national partners. This creates effective learning spaces for students to experience, reflect, think and act. They are then able to come into these spaces with a variety of learning styles and gain a wealth of experience prior to graduation.

AMEN and the ELT Learning Cycle

ELT has been applied to four modes of the experiential learning cycle – experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Jensen & Kolb, 1994; Border, 2007). This approach works exceptionally well combined with the "flipped classroom" approach where lower levels of cognitive work (gaining knowledge and comprehension) are done outside of class (Brame, 2013; Tucker, 2012). This allows higher levels of cognition work (application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation) to occur through AMEN.

Concrete Experiencing

Activating AMEN means giving students valuable experience. According to Kolb (1984), these are the initial "transactions between the learning and the environment" (p. 34). With AMEN, students are put into the space of doing real industry work. This opportunity can vary from class assignments and projects for a client to full marketing campaign execution for the university. With the assignments, students are working on short-term projects that provide real value to a partner. Often, the question is asked of clients, "What is a project you wish you had time to work on, but you currently do not have the resources?" This creates a client/student relationship with everything to gain and nothing to lose. Full marketing campaign experiences have the same approach, but are focused on specific opportunities for the university to improve. These types of opportunities are otherwise not available, so students can work in a campaign "lab" of sorts.

Outside of the application of the AMEN model, courses at many universities are often designed to have a "project" where students design a marketing plan or develop a strategy and arguably this may be thought of as a "concrete" experience. However, students rarely execute the campaign/plan they create, and the experience never enters into a stage where students can continue to reflect, apply abstract conceptualization, and actively experiment. A perfect example of this is the American Advertising Federation's (AAF) National Student Advertising Competition (NSAC), for which our university was a national finalist in 2018. Hundreds of AAF chapters across the United States spend a semester to nearly a year on a sponsored client case. Schools regionally present their campaigns to judges selected by the AAF with the winners moving on to a national competition. While the NSAC competition has experiential value and has long been looked at as a "gold standard" of marketing communication learning experiences, it pales in comparison to actually executing the created campaign. Our model addresses this challenge by allowing students the opportunity to move further in the experiential cycle by way of real content development, project execution, and optimization.

Reflective Observation

Reflective observation happens during and after the concrete experiences. These are opportunities for students to understand what is working and what is not. Similar to a natural science lab setting, students are able measure changes and reflect on the correlational and causal influences.

Reflective observation is a key differentiator of AMEN when contrasting differences compared to how many marketing communication courses are taught today. The reflection that occurs as students execute a true client project creates much more value because they are forced to make environment-level decisions (e.g., content creation, scheduling, evaluating, optimizing, A/B testing, etc.) and measure the outcome of these decisions. Combine this with the experiential value of using marketing technology (much of which is designed to allow A/B and multivariate testing) and students have a real differentiator in the job market.

Abstract Conceptualization

Abstract conceptualization happens throughout the project's duration as a result of reflection and active experimentation. Abstract conceptualization is where students synthesize the outcomes of the project in process and begin to identify patterns and processes to improve the project. This is where AMEN has huge value since in the sense of a marketing plan students will not have the opportunity to reflect on execution and conceptualize improvement from what they originally planned. For example, students working on a real campaign focused on student recruitment for the University might identify ways tactics could be improved by looking at data outcomes via key performance indicators (KPIs) and conceptualize a new approach ripe for active experimentation.

Active Experimentation

Once students have gone through the previous three steps, they are prepared to try new approaches to problem solving. AMEN gives students the opportunity to work as practitioners measuring real outcomes. Marketing has always taken an approach of adaptation in mid-campaign to optimize outcomes and this is where AMEN thrives for student learning. This is especially important around the application of marketing technology since true digital transformation takes the proper people, processes, and technology needed to be successful and true marketing campaigns never end the same way they begin.

AMEN IMPLICATIONS

The sum of the AMEN parts equal the whole experience. It is important to note while each step is essential for AMEN to work and the process is linear, many overlapping experiences can happen once the campaign is live. Any marketing professional knows the ability to adapt and critically think to resolve challenges while campaigns are in flight are essential parts of adaptation during the organic process of a true campaign.

Industry Certifications and Solutions Experience

In addition to the Adobe Experience Cloud partnership aspect of AMEN and students' marketing communication skillset development, our model looks at other valued experiential opportunities to combine professional credentials such as certifications and "badges" into curriculum via certifications. While Adobe has historically provided their own Digital Marketing Accreditation badge, we are also incorporating opportunities with Google for Adwords and Analytics certifications, as well as opportunities from other technology vendors such as Salesforce, HubSpot, HootSuite, Qualtrics, and SPSS training into the program. We also engage with data syndicators such as Nielsen/Claritas and others. In summary, while we have a unique industry partnership, we understand the best approach is solution-agnostic to ensure students obtain a wide variety of experiences with the different solutions they may use post-graduation.

T-Shaped Education

Applying AMEN as suggested here, leads to development of "T-shaped" professionals. T-shaped professionals have a breadth of competencies valuable across any work environment (broad top of the "T"), but bring a depth with a specific heightened knowledge of a skill (deep base of the "T") (Boynton, 2011). Companies like IBM and Cisco are beginning initiatives to identify candidates that have a t-shaped

resume (Hickman, 2016). Universities nationwide are also recognizing this hiring need. Lou Anna K. Simon, President of Michigan State says, "[We must] lead the nation in our reputation for graduating T-shaped people whose frame of reference and skills are a combination of broad and deep - people who are work-ready and highly sought after in the new global, intensively technological, data- and innovation-driven workplace." (Hickman, 2014).

AMEN ROI

At the University, we have seen several positive outcomes of the application of AMEN. For one, professors have been able to move from a greater focus on lecture-based instruction, to a mentoring/coaching approach with some corresponding applications of a flipped classroom (Tucker 2012). Though lecture still is a needed part of curriculum, this greater emphasis on mentoring and practical application in person appears to increase student retention of the concepts discussed. Additionally, via the relationship with Adobe, professors have partnered with other Adobe clients to create new partnerships and student opportunities. As an example, the University recently had student teams supporting nationwide clients in travel and tourism, chemical, healthcare, beverages, as well as numerous B2B and nonprofit industries. These industry partnerships have created revenue-generating opportunities for both the university and the participating students.

Improved student recruitment is perhaps the most astounding benefit of the new program approach. While a slight increase in undergraduate majors has been observed since the model has been applied, the graduate program offered in Brand & Media Strategy has grown over 1000% after rebranding and application of AMEN. A quick content analysis of students' "Statements of Purpose" provided when applying for the program highlights many of the elements in AMEN as a reason for their application to the program. Example quotes from those applications which highlight various aspects of AMEN include:

- "...what (the University) is doing with Adobe is monumental. This department is on the forefront of what is coming." (Industry partnership)
- "One of the most appealing things to me about obtaining my master's degree in Brand & Media Strategy is the curriculum." (Theory-based curriculum)
- "I am hopeful that (the University's) workforce-driven in degree in Brand & Media Strategy will give me the leading-edge theories, tools and techniques as well as practical experience I need to operate at a strategic and tactical level." (Theory-based curriculum, Project-based learning)
- "I feel that obtaining a specific set of skills and obtaining an advanced degree would allow me to edge out competition in future employment opportunities..." (T-shaped learning approach)
- "I will be able to create professional relationships..." (Industry connections)
- "I have been listening to what the current students are saying. I like what I hear, especially with the department being Adobe partnered." (Industry partnership)
- "Project-based learning and curriculum surrounding Adobe Digital Marketing and Analytics heavily interest me" (Project-based learning, Skills development, Industry partnership)
- "The Adobe certifications are a large component to my interest in the Brand & Media Strategy program... I am also interested in the other certifications from partner companies that will be offered... My goal is to gain real world experience... and expand my skill set. The partnership with Adobe will immensely help me with this goal." (Software certifications, Project-based learning, Industry partnerships)
- "I was impressed when I learned that students are given the opportunity to earn software certification through real industry experience..." (Software certifications, Project-based learning)
- "The Brand & Media Strategy program greatly appeals to me because it will equip me with critical thinking skills, analytical problem-solving strategies, and the theoretical and practical

academic knowledge for a successful career in marketing and service to others" (Theory-based curriculum, T-shaped learning approach)

- "It allows me to gain more theoretical knowledge about the necessary general and strategic management of media agencies, projects, and customer management, as well as practical experience by realizing my own extensive media project." (Theory-based curriculum, Project-based learning)
- "I look forward to working with Fortune 500 industry partners and having the opportunity to build professional relationships as well as earn software certifications through the Adobe and (University) partnership." (Industry partnerships, Software certifications)

From a student perspective, they have indeed used the skills gained in the AMEN approach for project-based learning, which in turn has provided project outputs that they can eventually showcase to employers. For example, one student team has been using Adobe Experience Manager to migrate site content for a major health system. In addition, each graduate capstone experience cohort now functions as a digital agency, named "BucDigital"- managing various marketing and communication aspects related to individual clients' needs in a "flipped classroom" approach (Tucker 2012). Recently, BucDigital redesigned and relaunched four websites using Adobe Experience Manager, working directly with partners throughout the process to ensure business goals are met. These are highly desirable experiences and align with what hiring managers in many industries are looking for. They have also built professional connections and an established network through these project and internship experiences, which leads to higher job placement after graduation.

From a higher education perspective, the University has also activated student project teams to support University initiatives. This includes work supporting various digital sites for the University (i.e., the Department of Media & Communication, the College of Arts and Sciences' Creative Arts Scholarships program, Medical Professions Advisement, and the Department of Appalachian Studies' Bluegrass, Old Time, and Country Music program) and analytics support. This work would either not be completed or would require additional funding and human capital without the availability of these student resources.

From a recruitment perspective, the AMEN model brings a point-of-differentiation to the educational institution. Parents and students are looking for programs that show a good return on investment and universities are always looking for "signature" programs that differentiate them in the academic marketplace. This model does specifically that by connecting the classroom directly with industry; thus, connecting graduates with high paying careers upon graduation. Currently, our placement rate for the Brand & Media Strategy program students participating in BucDigital is 100% (for students finding employment in an industry position or going on to complete a PhD program upon graduation).

CONCLUSION

Digital marketers who have a capability for critical thought, a hunger for continuous/deep learning (especially due to the continued evolution of the space), and a skill set that includes experience with the top technological solutions in the industry are in *very* high demand. In the most recent list of 100 Best Jobs from U.S. News and World Reports (2017), over a quarter of the jobs listed were related to Sales and Marketing, Business, Creative and Media, and Technology. The role of Marketing Manager is additionally listed as the most desirable Sales and Marketing focused role and is #14 in the highest paying jobs of 2017. As for role growth, "the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts… this profession to grow at a rate of 9 percent from 2014 to 2024, resulting in 18,200 new jobs for marketing managers." (U.S. News and World Report, 2017)

This, and many other articles, also state the importance of continued digital marketing education as another important aspect of this trend. We have found this to be reinforced in our conversations with many industry employers, who highlight a major talent gap in the industry, especially when trying to hire entry-level marketing roles. Through the application of ELT through AMEN, we are attempting to meet this need and in tandem, increase student job placement rates, further the work of the University, and

improve the talent of the field as a whole. To date, we have found the model to be extremely successful and look forward to seeing the continued impact of its application at this University and others.

Through the AMEN process, the University creates a student pipeline into the industry, which benefits both students and employers while creating internal value for university marketing and advancement through industry alliances. Students take the knowledge and experience gained at the University and directly apply this in roles post-graduation. Many times, students are also able to make connections and gain "in-roads" into desirable organizations and learn about entry-level opportunities through the project experience they complete for those same organizations in their courses. The industry connections directly impact instructors as well as they continue to be exposed to industry professionals and practices.

In summary, AMEN is a holistic approach to marketing and media-based education because it challenges students to work on industry-dictated challenges and creates opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting creating an industry-ready talent pipeline.

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