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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| From the Editor | 1 |
| Master Teaching: Pursuing Excellence in Marketing Education <i>Jeffrey S. Conant, Denise T. Smart, and Craig A. Kelley</i> | 3 |
| Specialization in Marketing Curricula <i>Jerry N. Conover and Austin Byron</i> | 14 |
| Corporate-Sponsored Research: An Opportunity for Educators <i>Douglas M. Lambert and Jay U. Sterling</i> | 20 |
| Introducing Antitrust in the Basic Marketing Course <i>Craig A. Kelley</i> | 29 |
| Publication in Major Marketing Journals: 1960-1986 <i>D. Michael Fields and Linda E. Swayne</i> | 36 |
| How to Write a Painful Manuscript: Prose and Cons <i>Alan G. Sawyer</i> | 49 |
| Marketing Education in Developing Countries: The View From Saudi Arabia <i>Secil Tuncalp</i> | 54 |
| Women Marketing Students and the Service Economy: A New Majority <i>Barbara B. Stern</i> | 62 |
| Applying Marketing Strategy and Personal Value Analysis to Career Planning: An Experiential Approach <i>Hugh E. Kramer</i> | 69 |
| PROLOG: A Business Logistics Simulation Game <i>James W. Gentry, George C. Jackson, and Fred W. Morgan</i> | 74 |
| Usage of Microcomputer Software in AACSB-Accredited Undergraduate and Graduate Marketing Programs <i>Brian J. McNeeley and Barry Berman</i> | 84 |
| Professional Meetings | 94 |

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Corporate-Sponsored Research: An Opportunity for Educators

Douglas M. Lambert and Jay U. Sterling

A recurring theme in many marketing and business journals is the need to integrate theory with practice. In the current economic environment, business is finding it exceedingly difficult to achieve corporate profit objectives. With tax revenues severely reduced or stagnant, many universities are experiencing substantial difficulty funding academic programs. The opportunity for joint practitioner/educator involvement has never been greater. This article describes the advantages and disadvantages of industry sponsorship of university research projects, as well as an actual example of this type of joint effort.

In an unpredictable business environment marked by inconsistent economic growth, unpredictable operating costs and interest rates, flat productivity growth rates, uncertain energy sources and costs, and recent deregulation, strategic planning has become critical. So that their corporations may succeed in the marketplace, management must continually reassess the internal corporate and external market environments—and relate environmental changes to the overall marketing, distribution, and financial missions of the firm. Proliferation of line items, shorter product life cycles, lower sales volume per item, and reduced inventory turns increase the costs of providing the desired levels of customer service.

Unfortunately, several barriers prevent many firms from identifying and solving these market-driven problems: (1) their employees may not possess the necessary research skills, (2) the information required to effectively and efficiently identify and solve problems may not be available, and, (3) sufficient resources may not be available. Because educators possess the expertise and necessary time, an opportunity

seems to exist for educators to assist practitioners in solving business-related problems.

However, recent articles in business and academic publications quote influential business school professors and practitioners who state that business schools place too much emphasis on quantitative and theoretical analysis and produce narrow-minded technicians who lack interpersonal and communications skills. These professors and practitioners also assert that business schools emphasize “tools” concepts and “models” at the expense of rigorous, more qualitative thinking, complex trade-offs and creativity, and concentrate on research that is irrelevant or of peripheral importance, with findings that are difficult to interpret and understand published in journals that are all but ignored by practitioners (Behrman and Levin 1984; Byrne 1986; Muse 1983; AACSB 1986).

These developments have occurred over the past 20 years, primarily in response to two landmark studies sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation (Gordon and Howell 1959; Pierson 1959). As a result, many major business schools have adopted the “liberal arts” model in which scholarship is supreme, individuals are evaluated primarily on the basis of their scholarly contributions (publications), and the practical applications of one’s ideas are less important or even irrelevant. Practical business experience is typically not valued as a component of the faculty member’s credentials, and most business schools have strayed

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from their primary purpose of improving the practice of management in the niches or markets they serve (Muse 1983).

Business schools must develop a broader definition of research for faculty and encourage applied research projects financed by industry. The specific results of the research may be provided to sponsoring firms in the form of technical or strategic reports, as well as generalized and published in refereed journals. An active partnership with industry is required, one that enlists the schools' expertise and at the same time provides relevant and exciting learning experiences for faculty members and students. To accomplish this goal, faculty members need to establish and maintain strong contacts with the business community (Behrman and Levin 1984). There is a need and an opportunity for practitioners and educators to join forces.

The balance of this article describes the advantages, disadvantages and procedural issues that can be expected when practitioners and educators become jointly involved in research projects. It concludes with a discussion of the results of three university research projects that were funded by corporate sponsors.

WHY SHOULD CORPORATIONS SPONSOR UNIVERSITY RESEARCH?

In many firms a trend now exists toward lean corporate staffs as recommended in *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman 1982). Because of this trend and an emphasis on productivity gains, management consulting is now one of the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. economy (Kirkland 1985). However, the use of consultants is expensive and the results often can be disappointing. An alternative is to allow educators to perform the task as a funded research project. The use of educators to assist in solving business problems offers several advantages to the sponsoring firm. It is very expensive to perform customer/consumer surveys, to conduct marketing or distribution audits, to devise new strategies or to design operating systems. By funding university researchers, the cost to the firm can be substantially reduced. Because educators will want to publish the results, the project normally will be conducted using leading edge methodologies and rigorous research techniques. However, educators must resist the temptation to make

the problem more complex than it is in order to utilize techniques that are currently in vogue in the leading research journals.

Employee involvement will normally be greater when educators rather than large consulting firms are used. Consultant pay is based on the number of hours expended. In order to minimize nonbillable time of their employees, large consulting firms strive to assign as many employees as possible over a short time frame. Thus, involvement by client employees could reduce a consultant's billable hours. On the other hand, academic responsibilities of educators require the active involvement of company employees if the project is to be completed on a timely basis.

A task force consisting of company employees from each of the functions or activities that will be involved in, or affected by, the project is an excellent way to achieve meaningful results. The task force can be used for a number of activities, including the following:

- assisting in the design of sampling forms and questionnaires, as well as in the actual data collection
- training operating personnel in the collection of data
- accessing and reformatting information from existing data processing files
- identifying and/or compiling customer lists for in-depth interviews or mail surveys
- providing data from existing performance measurement systems
- supplying long-range strategies and plans from the various corporate functions such as sales/marketing, finance, distribution/logistics and manufacturing/operations
- providing past internal or external studies that have been compiled on the same or related problems

Owing to time constraints imposed by the sponsoring firm and/or conflicting classroom responsibilities of the researchers, the task force may be responsible for many of the data-gathering and administrative activities required

to complete the project. This involvement can produce a number of long-term benefits: Corporate-wide data and information will be more accessible; cooperation across organization areas will be facilitated; individuals will be more likely to consider how their decisions affect other areas of the firm, as well as the firm as a whole; final recommendations will be more practical; and, because of direct employee involvement in the decision-making process, recommendations will be well received and employees will be committed to their implementation. These benefits are more likely to occur when an educator is used because of the higher level of employee involvement during the project. The benefits accruing to the sponsoring firm are summarized in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1
BENEFITS TO FIRMS
SPONSORING UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

The cost of utilizing outside resources is minimized.
"Leading edge" methodologies are employed.
Insures active employee involvement in the project.
Increases the probability of cooperation across functions and organizations.
Because of employee involvement final recommendations will be practical and realistic.
The "task force" approach improves the likelihood of acceptance of findings and commitment to their implementation.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF
EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT IN CORPORATE-
FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECTS

Joint industry-educator research projects benefit educators in several ways. Leading edge applied research offers academic researchers the opportunity to expand their knowledge and dispels the belief among practitioners that academicians are out of touch with actual business practices. By working on actual business problems, academicians can focus on the most relevant and important concerns facing industry. The result is a more pertinent and interesting classroom experience, which provides students with a competitive edge when they enter the job market.

To conduct meaningful research, educators need well-financed projects. In-depth personal interviews and mail and/or telephone surveys that generate meaningful results are expensive.

In most universities the required funding may not be available because of increasing pressure to tighten college and department budgets. The lack of adequate funding of research often leads to the use of convenience samples, such as students and small focus groups; insufficient pre-testing of questionnaires; poorly developed lists of potential respondents; and low response rates as a result of substandard quality questionnaires and lack of telephone qualification, commitment and follow-up of potential respondents. Corporate sponsorship of university research projects alleviates these problems and also provides research fellowships for Ph.D. and MBA students at a time when competition for top quality students has increased. These projects can also be used to provide junior faculty members with summer research stipends.

Finally, corporate-funded research provides the educator with opportunities to publish the findings and methodologies used. Because of the empirical nature of the projects, resulting publications will generally emphasize managerial and applied problem solving, although it is possible to research methodological issues. For example, in one of the industry-sponsored projects conducted by the authors, data were gathered from multiple informants in order to investigate the issue of multiple informant versus key informant, as discussed by Phillips (1981). In another project, the authors are testing hybrid conjoint techniques as proposed by Green (1984). The advantages to educators are summarized in Exhibit 2.

While many advantages are associated with corporate sponsorship of university research, some disadvantages should be recognized by the sponsoring firm. Usually projects of this nature take longer to complete than when an outside consulting firm is used, because the educator also has classroom responsibilities. In addition, the terms of the research proposal will specify that the results may be published and/or used as classroom material. The negative aspects of this requirement can be minimized by agreeing to delay publication for up to 12 months and by disguising the company and its industry.

The authors have discovered that formalizing written contractual agreements with large corporations can be time consuming and frustrating, because written proposals often will be subjected to review by legal representatives of the sponsoring firm. A rather simple, concise

EXHIBIT 2

ADVANTAGES OF EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT IN CORPORATE-FUNDED RESEARCH

Affords opportunities to conduct leading edge research
Expands knowledge of educators and the discipline
Dispels belief that educators are "out of touch"
Focuses academic research on "real world" problems
Improves students' learning experiences and brings relevancy to the classroom
Alleviates problems associated with under-financed projects, such as:

1. Use of convenience samples
2. Insufficient pre-test of questionnaires
3. Poorly developed respondent lists
4. Inadequate follow-up

Increases research fellowships for Ph.D. and MBA students
Increases the opportunity to:

1. Generalize previous research
 2. Develop rich data bases
 3. Empirically test key hypotheses and methodological issues
 4. Publish findings and methodologies used
-

arrangement can be expanded into a legal jungle of complex terminologies and restrictive specifications because legal staffs are unfamiliar with academic research and tend to apply normal vendor terms and conditions to the project. For example, large corporations that deal in government contract work, or routinely require competitive bids on purchases of raw material and component parts, may wish to treat the acquisition of specialized services such as the projects described in this article in the same manner. Management may also fear that the publication of data from the project could expose sensitive or proprietary information. This concern can be alleviated by pointing out that customer and/or product-specific data need not be included in journal articles. The major objectives in publishing the research findings are to test theories and develop generalizable methodologies, which can be done without disclosing sensitive cost or sales data.

When proposing joint industry-educator projects, educators therefore must communicate the objectives of the study to all of the parties involved; explain the environment required to conduct research and publish findings; and resist any efforts by employees of the sponsoring firm to insist upon obtaining the exclusive rights to any ideas, methodologies,

data bases, or system specifications that may be developed during the course of the project. The sponsoring firm must be properly educated at the outset so that the research findings will be available for subsequent use in the classroom and/or publications. The sponsoring firm must also understand that the cost of the project is a fraction of the going market price, because the primary goals of educators are to conduct meaningful research, publish the results and fund graduate students.

From an educator's perspective, industry-sponsored research may be time consuming when it occurs in addition to other university responsibilities. Educators must recognize this fact and attempt to include colleagues or graduate students in these projects. However, even with exceptionally well qualified doctoral or masters students, learning curve is involved and a considerable amount of faculty time and effort will be required if the students are to reach their potential. Depending on the environment within the university, college or department, corporate-sponsored research may be used to release faculty members and doctoral students from their regular teaching responsibilities.

Another disadvantage is that faculty colleagues may view these projects as "consulting" and therefore undesirable. Consequently, educators should make sure that the project has publication potential by conducting a thorough literature review and developing research questions and hypotheses. Also, the addition to the research team of colleagues with strong quantitative skills may soften criticism and insure that rigorous research methodologies are employed.

Universities may want to add overhead of 50% or more to the cost of research projects to cover the use of university facilities and other resources. University engineering and medical schools frequently are involved in research funded by governmental agencies, where this practice is routinely accepted owing to the high cost of the resources utilized. Typical business school projects do not require expensive research facilities and/or specialized administration. Therefore, it is important to negotiate a lower rate if your university insists on adding a surcharge to cover overhead.

Some faculty members may think that more financial reward and/or less effort result from teaching on a summer or overload basis, or working as a consultant, than in becoming

involved in corporate-sponsored research projects. However, assistant or untenured associate professors typically are expected to develop a record of publications to be promoted and/or granted tenure. Also, larger per diems for speaking at professional meetings, teaching on corporate executive development programs and consulting can be demanded by faculty members who have achieved national prominence for publications and "hands on" research experience. Therefore, it is good career planning to forego short-term financial gains for long-term benefits. It is surprising how many junior faculty members lack this approach to career planning.

To be effective, therefore, corporate-sponsored research projects must serve as funding sources for graduate students and/or junior faculty; provide rich data bases; add to classroom relevance; and, advance knowledge in the discipline. The disadvantages of corporate-funded research projects are summarized in Exhibit 3.

EXHIBIT 3

DISADVANTAGES OF EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT IN CORPORATE-FUNDED RESEARCH

Projects may take the sponsoring firm longer to complete due to educators' University responsibilities.

Formulating written contractual agreements can be time consuming and frustrating to educator

Management of sponsoring firm must be educated regarding:

1. Objectives of study
2. Academic environment
3. Need of educator to maintain control of resulting methodologies and data bases
4. The need to publish findings

Projects are time consuming for educator, and typically have completion deadlines.

Faculty colleagues may view these projects as "consulting" and therefore, undesirable.

University administrators may wish to apply large "overhead" charges to corporate-sponsored projects.

Faculty members may perceive consulting projects or summer teaching as less time consuming and financially more rewarding.

DEVELOPING AND MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

Over the past seven years, the authors have been involved in 12 corporate-sponsored university research projects that provided total funding approaching \$500,000. As a result of these projects, the authors have found that the framework described in Exhibit 4 is useful in

developing and managing the relationship with the sponsoring firm.

EXHIBIT 4

A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING AND MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

1. Initiate the contact.
2. Discussions to determine whether common ground exists.
3. Visit to company to define the scope of the project.
4. Complete preliminary review of the relevant literature.
5. Prepare a formal research proposal.
6. Establish a task force of company representatives.
7. Review corporate strategies, plans and objectives.
8. Structure "key questions" to be answered and develop research hypotheses.
9. Identify data requirements.
10. Collect and analyze the data.
11. Answer the research questions and prepare a formal report for the sponsoring firm.
12. Test research hypotheses and prepare manuscripts for submission to appropriate journals.

Although corporate-sponsored research projects offer many advantages to both educators and practitioners, many firms which could profit from such an arrangement are either unaware of the capabilities of educators in solving real business problems or suspect the intent and quality of the research provided by university professors. This is partly due to the "ivory tower" reputation of many business schools. Therefore, faculty members must actively participate in the professional organizations in their chosen field of expertise so that they have the opportunity to interact with practitioners and develop an understanding and appreciation for the problems that they face.

The authors have discovered that participation in university continuing education programs and seminars sponsored by professional organizations is an excellent way to establish contacts with managers from local and national firms. Success also breeds success. Once a meaningful project has been completed, relationship with the firm may be extended to a long-term, ongoing arrangement. In this way, time-consuming exploratory and administrative tasks are minimized for both parties, funding resources are stabilized at increased levels, a guaranteed number of students gain valuable research experience, and the firm's confidence rises because of the proven skills of the educators. It establishes credibility and notoriety for the educator with respect to other companies who may seek

similar types of assistance. It also provides current material for future executive development programs and presentations at professional association meetings.

A university's office of external affairs and/or development is another excellent source for industry-based studies and/or research projects. Before this resource can be utilized, however, university administrators must be convinced of the skills, tools and willingness of business school faculty members and students. The authors have observed that once administrators see the results that an actual joint industry-educator project can provide the university in terms of increased funding, added class room expertise, relevant publications, heightened student learning, and notoriety for the institution, they will serve as missionaries for individual faculty members and/or entire departments.

Projects must be managed professionally if the benefits intended for both parties are to be realized. Professional managers expect and deserve such things as formal agreements, the ability to participate in key decisions, periodic progress reviews, and actionable recommendations and implementation plans at the conclusion of the project. A formal, written agreement can benefit both parties if it defines the business problem so that a proper focus is maintained throughout the project; identifies specific objectives that are of major concern to management; outlines a sequential methodology that is both comprehensive and involves firm personnel; and specifies facilitating arrangements between the educators and the firm, such as financial terms, the nature of periodic progress reports, the guarantees required to safeguard proprietary information, and the process pertaining to any subsequent publications.

A distinct advantage of using educators over other outside sources such as a large consulting firm is the ability of the sponsoring firm to actively involve its personnel in key decision points, data collection and construction of final recommendations. To the researcher/educator this involvement is a necessity. To the practitioner, however, this involvement insures results that will be both practical and readily accepted by its management. The authors have observed over the course of several projects that an effective way to operationalize both company participation and the data collection process is to construct a set of key

questions at the beginning of the project, during initial, exploratory meetings. These questions serve as the framework for constructing meaningful qualitative and quantitative analyses such as personal interviews, mail or phone surveys, and samplings of company transactions. The questions are "key" because they both identify the source and type of data that need to be collected and, if they are successfully answered, insure that the problems identified at the beginning of the project will be adequately addressed.

Good managers dislike surprises because they are embarrassing and result in "reactive" rather than "proactive" problem solving. Therefore, the intended results of a project can be enhanced if management is kept apprised of progress and bottlenecks, and participates in the formulation of tentative findings. However, care must be exercised that managers do not attempt to implement changes before the study is completed. Often, preliminary findings will indicate that one course of action is appropriate, while the complete findings may lead to a different set of recommendations. To insure actionable recommendations and the achievement of maximum benefits to the firm, the final report should identify specific implementation processes and timetables. At the same time, educators must structure the methodology, key questions, data collection processes, and the final report so that subsequent research publications, cases, and the like can be readily justified and constructed.

A SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLE

The authors have successfully completed a number of corporate-sponsored university research projects using the framework described in Exhibit 4. The following example illustrates how the framework can be implemented.

The company was a manufacturer of office systems and furniture products, headquartered in the midwest, with production and assembly facilities in the midwest, southeast, southwest and west coast. Annual sales approximated \$250 million. Products were shipped to approximately 200 dealers (distributors) as well as to large, key customers from five distribution centers located adjacent to the manufacturing/assembly plants. In addition, 12 regional sales offices were located in key metropolitan areas to

serve dealers and end users. For the past five years the company had experienced a 25% annual growth rate in sales and profitability. However, sales had leveled off and management was searching for cost reduction opportunities. A manager with the firm had attended a university-sponsored executive development seminar the previous year, and he contacted one of the authors for assistance in identifying cost reduction opportunities.

Although the firm initially wanted to hire the faculty members as consultants, examination of the proposed project indicated that it had publication potential and would qualify as a university research project. The advantage to the firm would be a considerable cost savings. For a \$10,000 donation to the university, plus out-of-pocket expenses associated with the project, the firm would receive 20 hours each week from a doctoral student for two quarters, and a faculty member as an advisor. The company expressed interest in funding the research project and a visit to the company's headquarters was scheduled to define the scope of the project.

It was agreed that the project would consist of a review of the firm's distribution system and channel network in order to identify cost-reduction opportunities. A review of the literature indicated that a need existed for a methodology for assessing distribution channels in firms that lacked sophisticated data bases. The sophisticated models proposed in the literature all assumed that the data were readily available. A research proposal was submitted to the firm. Once management approved the proposal, a task force was organized, corporate strategies, plans and objectives were reviewed, and research questions and data requirements were identified. Approximately 5,600 inbound receipts of vendor materials, intercompany transfers, outbound shipments of finished products and warehouse activities were sampled over a six-week period. Private fleet trips and freight bills paid to outside carriers were analyzed for a 13-week time frame. The results of this review led to the conclusion that the firm could reduce its total annual distribution cost by \$2.9 million. When implemented, the recommended changes actually generated savings in excess of \$4 million. In order to insure that the above savings would be achieved, a new organizational unit was formed. It combined distribution

activities and functions that previously had resided within manufacturing and marketing. The project cost the firm approximately \$30,000, including out-of-pocket computer costs and funding to the university. Task force salaries were not included in the above figure, since members continued to work at their regular jobs.

The success of the first project led to a second study. The specific objective was to design and implement an on-going, interactive system to control inbound shipments of raw materials and parts. The researchers worked with various managers in the firm's physical distribution, purchasing, manufacturing and data processing functions to conceptualize and structure definitive procedures, operating rules, systems requirements and measurement techniques.

Potential cost savings of \$1.1 million were documented as a result of surveying all vendors and sampling inbound receipts to determine the magnitude of inbound volumes and costs; revising manufacturing (MRP), purchase order, and distribution operating systems and files; developing revised terms and conditions for shipping, billing and packing by vendors; and implementing a vendor charge-back program to insure compliance by vendors on an on-going basis. The total cost of this project was \$20,000.

Given the success of the first two projects, the researchers proposed that the firm sponsor another project with the objective of developing an integrated marketing strategy. The research methodology consisted of in-depth interviews with 26 representative customers. A comprehensive 12-page questionnaire was developed from the in-depth interviews, and was mailed to dealers, end users and key decision influencers in the channel. Respondents were asked to identify the importance of 100 marketing variables used in the selection of vendors and allocation of business to them; evaluate their four major vendors on each of the 100 marketing variables; provide expected levels of performance on the marketing services that could be quantified; and provide demographic data, including the amount of business allocated to each of their vendors. The research incorporated consideration of the role of the various channel levels and market segments and recommended specific marketing services that would enable the firm to gain differential advantage in the marketplace.

The funding for this entire project totaled \$70,000, of which \$25,000 represented a donation to the university. The remaining \$45,000 covered out-of-pocket expenses of the research, such as travel, questionnaire printing, telephone expense and mailing costs. Expenses were reimbursed as the costs were incurred. Of the \$25,000 donated to the university, \$18,000 was used to fund a doctoral student for the dissertation year and \$7,000 was retained in the marketing department's budget. Industry sponsorship enabled the researchers to obtain responses from 562 firms, making it the most comprehensive study of the role of customer service in the marketing mix thus far reported in the literature. In addition, the researchers were able to substantiate that a manufacturer's performance with respect to the marketing services offered to customers determines market share; identify the relative importance of the four components of the marketing mix in determining a manufacturer's market share; and, show that market segments could be identified based on the importance of the marketing services offered by manufacturers.

At the conclusion of the project, the authors recommended a new marketing strategy for the firm based on the results of the study. Built around a concise set of marketing services, the strategy would enable the firm to gain market share and achieve differential advantage in the marketplace. Key elements of the strategy included a five-year warranty on products, quality audits for major projects, trade-in allowances, and guaranteed move-in dates in an industry plagued by delays in delivery. The firm launched a customer satisfaction program unmatched in the office furniture business (*Marketing News* 1986).

CONCLUSIONS

Industry and educators can address many problem areas on a collaborative basis, and cooperation between the business and academic communities can result in substantial benefits to each when research projects concern mutual interests. The researchers were able to test several hypotheses and develop methodologies for assessing a firm's performance without having to rely on sophisticated data bases. The research process and recommendations developed in this article were judged by management

to depict the marketing environment accurately. The projects were completed in a short time frame and at a cost that was substantially less than that which would have been incurred using alternative sources or techniques.

Equally significant is the fact that the monies derived from the 12 projects undertaken by the researchers over the past seven years have provided funding for three Ph.D. dissertations, plus full financial support for two doctoral students for three years, three doctoral students for up to one year each, and a number of MBA students. In addition, the following publications have resulted from the projects: two dissertations, two research monographs, 10 articles in refereed journals, 11 papers presented at educator and professional association national conferences, plus several other papers currently under review or in process. All of these publications and presentations were co-authored by faculty and doctoral or MBA students. Therefore, students were able to gain valuable publication recognition prior to the completion of their education. Many large state universities fund doctoral students by using them to teach sections of large introductory courses. Funded research projects enable doctoral students to obtain research experience in addition to teaching experience. As a result, students are able to publish and gain valuable industry experience while developing the necessary research skills. The publications assist students in obtaining employment at more prestigious institutions than would otherwise be possible. This benefits both the university and the student.

To accomplish the original tenets upon which business schools were founded, educators must perform research on *all* aspects of the management process, and communicate this information to existing and future managers. This requires close cooperation and extensive communication with the constituency that educators serve—the business community. This can be achieved by presenting research findings in a manner that the practitioner can understand, and communicating these findings through continuing education programs and publications that reach key practitioners. A primary task of business schools must be to develop scholars who can communicate with managers about business philosophy, the business environment, business planning and business decision making (Behrman and Levin 1984).

As demonstrated in this article, corporate-sponsored university research projects can produce synergistic results: They yield low cost, fast payback opportunities for the sponsoring firms and enable educators to conduct well-financed research that focuses on significant industry problems which advance professional skills and knowledge of the marketing discipline.

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