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Student Attitudes toward Educational Approaches and Assessment Techniques:  
A Retail Merchandising Course Outcomes Assessment

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**Introduction** Outcome assessments provide a platform for students to confirm their achievement of learning and ability to use knowledge gained from academic courses (Mort & Messerschmidt, 2001). The process of assessing outcomes is used to continually improve student learning through systematic curriculum assessment, evaluation, and adjustment (Duncan, VanDerZanden, Haynes, & Esters, 2008). This process helps to determine the success of curricula and student learning, and provides direction for improvement. In higher education, outcome assessments are gaining more prominence (Newcomer, 2000). Learning objectives are required on syllabi and instructors plan course activities that address specified learning outcomes. In the context of the apparel merchandising and retail curriculum, little research has been conducted regarding learning outcome assessments in relation to specific learning objectives. This study presents a systematic approach for conducting learning outcome assessments in an introductory retail merchandising course.

**Conceptual framework and hypotheses** Learning outcomes are broad statements which incorporate a wide range of knowledge and skills that students will be able to demonstrate once they have completed a given course. In contrast, learning objectives tend to describe specific, discrete elements of knowledge and skills that are observable and contain measurable items that support broader learning outcomes (Harden, 2002). For excellence in teaching, course work should be designed in such a way that the educational approaches (i.e., lectures, discussion activities, study guides, textbook) and assessment techniques (i.e., quizzes, exams, assignments, class project) help students to achieve learning objectives (“Bloom’s,” 2003). The purpose of the present study is to test student attitudes toward educational approaches and assessment techniques. The relationship between student attitudes and perceived achievement on student learning objectives will also be assessed in the context of a retail merchandising course. Thus, two hypotheses were posited:

**H1:** Students’ attitude toward educational approaches will positively influence their perceived success regarding the attainment of specified learning objectives.

**H2:** Students’ attitude toward assessment techniques will positively influence their perceived success regarding the attainment of specified learning objectives.

**Methods** Institutional Review Board approval was received for the study and a questionnaire was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational approaches, assessment techniques, and learning objectives for a retail merchandising course. It consisted of 19 Likert-type scale items and was administered using Qualtrics software. Students were also asked demographic questions: gender, academic class, and age. Data collection was conducted on-line at the end of the semester in which students were enrolled in the course.

**Results** Of the 106 students who received the questionnaire, 97 cases were deemed complete and usable, for a response rate of 92%. Descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), reliability analysis, and hierarchical linear regression analysis were conducted via SPSS 22.0. The majority of the students were female (96%) and either sophomores (49%) or juniors (34%). The mean age of respondents was 20. EFA revealed three distinct factors: Attitude toward educational approaches, attitude toward assessment techniques, and perceived achievement on student learning objectives. No items were omitted due to cross-loading and Cronbach's alphas for all three factors were  $> .70$ , indicating strong internal consistency. Furthermore, hierarchical linear regression analysis revealed that both hypotheses were supported. Based on standardized beta coefficients and significance levels, attitude toward educational approaches positively influenced perceived achievement on learning objectives ( $\beta = .242, p = .026, R^2 = .81$ ) and attitude toward assessment techniques positively influenced perceived achievement on learning objectives ( $\beta = .676, p = .000, R^2 = .81$ ). Overall, 81% of the variance in perceived success regarding the attainment of specified learning objectives was explained by this model.

**Conclusion and implications** The research findings contribute to a better understanding of evaluating learning objectives via students' attitude toward educational approaches (i.e., use of lectures, discussion activities, study guides, textbook) and assessment techniques (i.e., conduct quizzes, exams, assignments, class project). For example, students were able to achieve the specified learning objectives when they were given three attempts, instead of just one attempt, to complete each online quiz and highest score was recorded. Participants perceived higher achievement on retail merchandising learning objectives when the instructor engaged them in the outcomes assessment process, thereby fostering an emotional attachment and enhanced commitment by the students; hence, students had a positive attitude toward the educational approaches and assessment techniques used in this course. The present study demonstrates an attempt to create and implement a plan that will help to optimize the retail merchandising curriculum and improve students' achievement of outcomes. A longitudinal study is proposed to collect data in retail merchandising courses so that continuous improvement is achieved not only within a single semester, but between semesters and across various courses in retail merchandising. Future studies will additionally investigate which specific educational approaches and assessment techniques students perceive to be the most effective.

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