

## **The Impact of a Professional Selling Course on Student Perceptions: A Before and After Look**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*For decades, (going back to the 1950s) the negative attitudes students hold towards salespeople and sales careers have been of concern to university educators and to employers seeking to recruit well-trained sales people. While the increasing demand for university educated salespeople continues to grow, employers are struggling to meet that demand. This study reports the impact of a professional selling course on changes in student perceptions regarding (a) the desirability of a professional selling career, (b) the usefulness of a professional selling course for developing selling skill sets in entry-level salespeople, (c) the customer orientation of salespeople, and (d) societal perceptions of salespeople. Results show that both male and female college students perceived the selling profession and salespeople more positively after taking the sales course, and that these students had positive perceptions regarding the skill set gained through such courses.*

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## Introduction

In 2014, Selling Power 500 ([www.sellingpower.com](http://www.sellingpower.com)) reported some intriguing statistics regarding professional selling careers:

- 1) The total number of salespersons employed by the 500 companies with the largest sales forces exceeded 24 million;
- 2) Those 500 firms will endeavor to recruit approximately 500,000 college graduates for sales positions every year.

In an economy that has many business majors questioning just where their degrees will take them in terms of career opportunities, those statistics should represent promising news and are indicative of promising on-going prospects for university students. Coupled with estimates that up to 80% of college students majoring in marketing and up to 60% of all business majors (Agnihotri et. al. 2014) will spend some portion of their careers in professional selling (Heckman, 1998; Jones, Stevens, and Chonko, 2005), one might reasonably predict that university business students would view professional selling as a promising career option. However, decades of related research has shown that such is not the case.

In light of these research findings and subsequent implications, the authors of this manuscript sought to empirically investigate the following fundamental research question: What impact, if any, does a university professional selling course have on student attitudes and perceptions towards professional selling as a career?

## Literature Review

The unexpected discrepancy between positive career opportunities and university students' negative attitudes towards professional selling has led to a rich history of research in the sales discipline. One generally consistent finding in that research has been convincing evidence that university students tend to hold negative attitudes towards professional selling. In 1961, McMurry reported that salespeople were viewed as being 'pushy and deceitful'. A decade later, Paul and Worthing (1970) found that college students continued to hold generally negative perceptions of sales people. In 1981, Dubinsky reported that salespeople were considered to be, amongst other things, monotonous, uneducated, high-pressure phony individuals. Later in the 1980s, researchers unveiled further evidence of the pervasiveness of negative opinions of professional selling. In a study of 300 university marketing students, Weeks and Muehling (1987) reported that almost 70% of the students' most salient thoughts regarding professional selling were negative and that nearly 60% of the characteristics associated with salespeople were negative. In a 1999 cross-national study of business students' perceptions of sales careers, Honeycutt and his colleagues found that students in the United States, New Zealand and the Philippines used such words as 'boring', 'stressful' and 'pushy' to describe industrial sales/salespeople.

A broader look at the relevant 50 plus year literature provides a colorful picture of some of the key work done in the area of perceptions of and attitudes towards professional selling and/or salespeople. For example, researchers have examined student attitudes towards selling careers (Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Wayman, 1974; Dauner and Johnson, 1979; Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham, 2011); cross-national investigations of student attitudes towards personal selling (e.g., Lysonski and Durvasula, 1998; Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham, 2011); attitudes of women toward professional selling (e.g., Cook and Hartman, 1986); perceptual differences by race (DeVecchio, 2000; DeVecchio and Honeycutt, 2002); and student preference for sales careers (Dubinsky and O'Connor, 1983; Swenson et al. 1993).

A common theme running through the literature is that college students maintain, to a lesser or greater level, negative stereotypes about the sales profession and salespeople (e.g., Bristow et al., 2006; Weeks and Muehling, 1987). Also, researchers have found that, by and large, students were (consequently) not positively disposed towards sales careers (Bristow, Gulati, and Amyx, 2006; Bristow et al., 2006; Stevenson and Paksoy, 1983). These findings, combined with the extant demand by firms for college graduates interested in professional selling positions, suggest a continued need to evaluate college student perceptions regarding selling professions and salespeople. Such continued work would have predictably positive consequences for organizations looking towards universities to fill entry-level sales positions and for the universities and colleges offering sales related curriculum.

With those consequences in mind, this study examined the following research questions:

1a. What are the differences, if any, between college students' perceptions at the beginning of a professional selling course/1b. end of a professional selling course with respect to:

- a. The desirability of a career in professional selling
- b. The difference in selling skills between an entry-level professional salesperson who has taken a course in professional selling versus another entry-level salesperson who has not been exposed to such a course
- c. The customer orientation of a professional salesperson
- d. Societal perceptions of a professional salesperson

2. What are the demographic (gender; grade point average [GPA]) differences, if any, between college students' perceptions at the beginning of a professional selling course/end of a professional selling course with respect to:

- a. The desirability of a career in professional selling
- b. The difference in selling skills between an entry-level professional salesperson who has taken a course in professional selling versus another entry-level salesperson who has not been exposed to such a course
- c. The customer orientation of a professional salesperson
- d. Societal perceptions of a professional salesperson

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The study employed the survey research method and featured a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Participants were university students enrolled in a semester-long (15 weeks) professional selling course. The questionnaires were distributed during regularly scheduled class sessions by the instructors teaching professional selling classes to all enrolled students at two different points in time – once during the first week of the course [Phase 1] and a second time during the last week (prior to final examination week) of the course [Phase 2]. Each instructor read the definition of a professional salesperson from the questionnaire and asked students to complete the questionnaire. Student participation in the study was completely voluntary and the responses of individual students remained anonymous and were analyzed in aggregate form only. In an effort to enhance the generalizability of this study, data was collected in professional selling courses at four separate US universities during the same semester – two mid-western universities, one university in the central plains, and one southern university. The professional selling course was a required/compulsory course in the marketing major at each of these universities and the courses were taught by professors with similar years of experience in teaching sales courses at the university level. None of the universities included in the study featured a sales center or offered a sales certificate program. Upon completion, the

questionnaires were collected by the relevant instructors/professors and returned by mail or faxed to the authors of the study.

A total of 139 students, across the four universities, were available at the beginning of the semester to complete the questionnaire on the day the survey was administered [Phase 1]. Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the participants.

**Table 1:**  
*Demographic Profile of Participants*

Demographic Variable	n	%	Demographic Variable	n	%
<b>Age</b>			<b>Major</b>		
12 - 22 years	97	69.8	Accounting	5	3.6
23 - 27 years	40	28.8	Finance	8	5.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>98.6</b>	Information Systems	1	0.7
<b>Gender</b>			Management	12	8.6
Female	59	52.5	Marketing	88	63.3
Male	76	54.7	International Business	23	16.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>97.1</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>98.5</b>
<b>Ethnic Background</b>			<b>Class Standing</b>		
American Indian	3	2.2	Junior	38	27.3
African American	5	3.6	Senior	97	69.8
Asian	12	8.6	Graduate Student	1	0.7
Caucasian	112	80.6	<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>97.8</b>
Hispanic	1	0.7	<b>GPA</b>		
Other	4	2.9	2.0 - 2.49	8	5.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>98.6</b>	2.5 - 2.99	56	40.3
			3.0 - 3.49	50	36.0
			3.5 - 4.00	23	16.5
			<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>98.6</b>

### **Survey Instrument**

A 4-page booklet style questionnaire was employed in the study. Initially, the authors of this manuscript adopted the 27 statements used by Bristow, Gulati, and Amyx, (2006) and replicated the 5-point Likert-type scales (with endpoints of 1 = Agree Completely and 5 = Disagree Completely) used by those authors. After further review, one item addressing the desirability of professional selling was deemed repetitive and was removed from consideration. The authors, after reviewing the sales literature, and after discussions with peers, added five items that addressed student attitudes about a professional selling position and two items that sought student opinions regarding the overall desirability of a professional selling course for entry-level salespeople. The additional items were pretested with students not participating in the study to ensure understanding and clarity. The final 31 Likert-type scaled statements included in the questionnaire, as well as two questions designed to assess interest in a professional selling career and the likelihood that participants would at some time hold a sales position, are presented in Table 2. The final questionnaire also included demographic questions related to participant gender, ethnicity, Major and Minor academic concentrations, academic standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), GPA, age, and work experience (including but not limited to sales experience).

**Table 2:**  
*Survey Instrument Items and Initial Responses*

Variable	n	Mean	Std Dev
For me, a sales related career would be rewarding	139	3.47	1.017
For me, a sales related career would be fun and exciting	139	3.48	1.052
For me, a sales related career would be satisfying	139	3.32	1.023
A sales related career would offer me career growth opportunities	136	3.87	1.076
I would enjoy the challenges of a career in professional selling	139	3.55	.994
A job in professional selling would be interesting	139	3.65	.970
I would very much like being a professional salesperson	138	3.02	1.260
I would feel a sense of pride in being a professional salesperson	138	3.32	1.090
Most days I would be enthusiastic about working in professional sales	139	3.40	1.140
I would find real enjoyment in being a professional salesperson	138	3.17	1.129
Sales people often intentionally misrepresent guarantees/warranties	139	2.77	1.031
Sales people routinely take advantage of uneducated buyers	139	3.17	1.047
Sales people often exaggerate the benefits of the products they sell	139	3.56	.964
Sales people commonly sell customers products that they don't need	139	3.26	1.017
Rather than admit that they don't know the answer to a buyer's question, sales people often make something up	139	2.97	.970
Sales people often lie in order to make a sale	139	2.65	1.049
Professional sales people are admired or respected by others	139	2.82	.853
Most professional sales people are perceived favorably by others	139	2.75	.861
Most professional sales people are trustworthy and honest	87	2.99	.869
For the most part, professional sales people are thought of highly by others	87	2.68	.896
<b>The entry-level salesperson who completed a personal selling course in college will...</b>	139	3.79	.864
...possess superior oral communication skills	139	3.99	.771
...be better prepared to prospect for new customers	139	3.96	.731
...be better prepared to effectively qualify new prospects	139	4.19	.813
...make more effective sales presentations	139	3.97	.842
...be better prepared to deal with client objections	139	4.04	.867
...be better prepared to close a sale	139	4.07	.777
...be better prepared for success in a professional selling career	114	3.27	1.709
...better appreciate the importance of providing service after the sale	114	3.07	1.662
...be a more effective listener	114	3.28	1.715
...better recognize the importance of understanding customer needs in professional selling	114	3.14	1.679
...be better prepared to deal with ethical dilemmas in selling situations	139	4.17	1.096
It is important that entry level salespeople have completed at least one professional selling course while in college	139	4.12	.835
After completing a professional selling course during their college career, students are better prepared for a career in professional selling	136	3.36	1.297
After you graduate from college, how likely is it that you will, at some time in your career, hold a position in professional sales	136	3.00	1.357
How interested are you in pursuing a sales related career after your graduation from college			

Because respondents would not have had a prior course in professional selling, the authors included the following definition of a professional salesperson on the first page of the questionnaire:

*"For this study, we define a professional salesperson as a person who has built or seeks to build a career in selling products and services to various customer groups. This salesperson can be self-employed or work for or represent a firm. A professional salesperson sells or aims to sell products and services to other organizations (retailer, wholesaler, or manufacturer/marketer) as well as to final consumers like you."*

## Results

To answer the research questions, the data was subjected to t-tests and ANOVA procedures using SPSS, Version 19. Levene's Statistic was used to determine whether the variances between two or more groups could be assumed to be the same, and in cases where Levene's Statistic was significant, SPSS procedures were run assuming difference in variability between groups. To control for experiment-wise error rate, the Bonferroni t-tests were used to determine significance of post-hoc tests and the conservative Tamhane's T2 tests were conducted where equal variances could not be assumed for the analyzed groups (see SPSS, Version 19). The following section presents the various research questions and the results of analyses conducted to answer them.

**Research Question 1a.** Student Perceptions at the Beginning of the Sales Course  
The means of the responses, obtained from all respondents at the beginning of the semester, against various statements and questions indicated that students enrolled in a professional selling course at these universities perceived that a career in sales was somewhat (a) rewarding, (b) fun and exciting, (c) satisfying, (d) likely to offer career growth opportunities, and (e) challenging as evidenced by means ranging from 3.32 to 3.87 on a 5-point scale. In evaluating the desirability of a career in professional selling, these respondents perceived most positively an opportunity for future career growth. Respondents agreed strongly ( $\mu = 4.17$ ) that an entry-level salesperson would benefit from having completed at least one professional selling course while in college, and were positively aligned to the idea that students are better prepared for a career in professional selling after completing a professional selling course in college ( $\mu = 4.12$ ).

Participants were marginally positive in their perceptions regarding whether a job in professional selling would (a) be interesting, (b) be something they would like very much, (c) be something they would take pride in, (d) make them enthusiastic about work, and (e) provide them with real enjoyment. Means for these statements ranged from 3.02 to 3.65 with the highest mean obtained for the statement that spoke to a professional selling job being interesting.

At the beginning of the semester, respondents perceived, positively, that as compared to someone who did not have a professional selling course in college, an entry-level salesperson who had such a course would possess superior communication skills ( $\mu = 3.79$ ), be better prepared to prospect for new customers ( $\mu = 3.99$ ), be better prepared to effectively qualify new prospects ( $\mu = 3.96$ ), make more effective sales presentations ( $\mu = 4.19$ ), be better prepared to deal with client objections ( $\mu = 3.97$ ), be better prepared to close a sale ( $\mu = 4.04$ ), and be better prepared for success in a professional selling career ( $\mu = 4.07$ ). Responding students had neutral to slightly positive perceptions that a salesperson who had taken a professional selling class would better appreciate the importance of providing service after sale ( $\mu = 3.27$ ), be a more effective listener ( $\mu = 3.07$ ), better recognize the importance of understanding

customer needs in professional selling ( $\mu = 3.28$ ), and be better prepared to deal with ethical dilemmas in selling situations ( $\mu = 3.14$ ). The mean responses to statements pertaining to the second section of the above research question indicate that, overall, respondents had positive evaluations regarding the benefits of a college professional selling course for entry-level salespeople. The mean scores also signal, to an extent, the learning expectations of sampled college students.

Given that six statements that evaluated college student perceptions regarding aspects of customer orientation of salespeople were worded negatively, low means would imply that respondents felt that salespeople were customer-oriented and vice versa. Results showed that at the beginning of the professional selling course, students did not have a positive attitude towards the behaviors of professional salespeople. They did disagree somewhat with the statement that professional salespeople intentionally misrepresented guarantees/warranties ( $\mu = 2.77$ ), but tended to agree that professional salespeople took advantage of uneducated buyers ( $\mu = 3.17$ ), that salespeople exaggerated the benefits of their products in order to procure sales ( $\mu = 3.56$ ), and that salespeople tended to sell unneeded products to customers ( $\mu = 3.26$ ). Surveyed respondents did not have a strong opinion regarding whether professional salespeople made up information to satisfy a buyer ( $\mu = 2.97$ ) and they disagreed somewhat that professional salespeople often lied in order to make a sale ( $\mu = 2.65$ ).

Based on the mean values of responses to 4 social-image related items, respondents perceived that professional salespeople were perceived negatively in society. They tended to disagree with statements that professional salespeople were admired or respected by others ( $\mu = 2.82$ ), were perceived favorably by others ( $\mu = 2.75$ ), and were neutral in their perceptions when responding to the statement that most salespeople were trustworthy and honest ( $\mu = 2.99$ ). The respondents disagreed with the notion that professional salespeople were thought of highly by others ( $\mu = 2.68$ ). These results are similar to earlier findings (see Bristow et al. 2006). At the same time, these students agreed somewhat that they were likely to hold a position as a professional salesperson at some time in their career ( $\mu = 3.36$ ) and exhibited neutrality with regard to their interest in pursuing a career in professional selling ( $\mu = 3.0$ ).

**Research Question 1b.** Student Perceptions at the End of the Sales Course  
Table 3 lists the statistically significant differences in perceptions held by participants between the beginning [Phase 1] and the end of a semester-long (16-week) professional selling course [Phase 2]. A statistically significant increase was observed in the mean perception score for the global statement that students are better prepared for a career in professional selling after taking a college level professional selling course ( $t = 2.18, p < .05$ ). A direct conclusion is that these students perceived the relevance of a college professional selling course more favorably after having completing the course. The authors of this study expected that exposure to a professional selling class would likely improve college student perceptions regarding selling professions and regarding professional salespeople. Although not statistically significant, the mean values of the items representing the desirability of a career in personal selling were mostly higher at the end of the semester as compared to the same values at the beginning of the semester. A similar pattern was found for the eleven items that measured the participants' perceptions regarding the skills of an entry-level salesperson who had completed a college-level professional selling course as compared to another entry-level salesperson who did not complete such a course. As Table 3 depicts, three of those eleven items showed statistically significant improvements in mean student perceptions: Students agreed strongly that an entry-level salesperson who has completed a college professional selling course is (a) better prepared to effectively qualify new prospects ( $t = 2.42, p < .05$ ), better prepared to deal with client

objections (3.07,  $p < .01$ ), and better prepared to close a sale ( $t = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Overall, the results indicate a positive shift in respondents' perceptions with regards to skills taught in a college professional selling course.

Table 3 also shows that college student perceptions regarding the customer orientation of salespeople improved significantly after they completed a semester-long professional selling course. As reported earlier in the paper, at the beginning of the semester [Phase 1], respondents did not think that professional salespeople were customer-oriented. At the end of the course [Phase 2], mean perception scores against all six negatively-worded statements addressing a professional salesperson's customer orientation decreased significantly, indicating statistically significant improvements in how these students viewed professional salespersons' behavior towards customers. At the end of a professional selling course, students were less likely to perceive (a) that salespeople often intentionally misrepresented guarantees and warranties ( $t = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ), (b) that salespeople took advantage of uneducated buyers ( $t = 3.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ), (c) that salespeople exaggerated product benefits ( $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ), (d) that salespeople sold customers products they did not need ( $t = 4.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ), (e) that professional salespeople made up information if they did not know something ( $t = 3.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and (f) that professional salespeople often lied in order to make a sale ( $t = 3.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the four universities where data was collected, then, students who were "exposed" to a professional selling course perceived that salespeople were customer-oriented, a dramatic shift from their initial perceptions.

Lastly, results presented in Table 3 indicate that student perceptions regarding whether or not most salespeople are trustworthy and honest ( $t = 3.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and whether professional salespeople are highly thought of by others ( $t = 2.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ) showed statistically significant improvements. Mean perception scores on the two other items measuring image perceptions of salespeople also increased slightly, though the increase was not significant statistically. In sum, however, the mean perception scores of students indicated that they did not perceive that salespeople had a positive image in society (see Table 3).

**Table 3:**  
*Mean Perceptions and Statistically Significant Differences*

Variable	Pre	Post	df	t	
	Mean	Mean			
After completing a professional selling course during their college career, students are better prepared for a career in professional selling	4.12	4.34	271	-2.18	*
...be better prepared to prospect for new customers	3.99	4.22	271	-2.42	*
...be better prepared to deal with client objections	3.97	4.30	271	-3.07	**
...be better prepared to close a sale	4.04	4.27	271	-2.18	*
Sales people often intentionally misrepresent guarantees/warranties	2.77	2.46	271	2.59	*
Sales people routinely take advantage of uneducated buyers	3.17	2.72	261.88	3.26	**
Sales people often exaggerate the benefits of the products they sell	3.56	3.05	271	4.04	**
Sales people commonly sell customers products that they don't need	3.26	2.70	262.4	4.18	**
Rather than admit that they don't know the answer to a buyer's question, sales people often make something up	2.97	2.54	262.99	3.43	**
Sales people often lie in order to make a sale	2.65	2.16	271	3.71	**
Most professional sales people are trustworthy and honest	2.99	3.35	194	-3.00	**
For the most part, professional sales people are thought of highly by others	2.68	2.98	176.17	-2.45	*

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$



**Research Question 2.** Demographic Differences in Student Perceptions

Table 4 reports the statistically significant differences observed both at the beginning [Phase 1] and at the end of the professional selling course [Phase 2]. In this paper, the authors investigated the impact, if any, of 1) gender and 2) achievement in college (GPA) on differences in mean perception scores.

*Gender Differences.* Based on prior research conducted in this area, it was posited that, as compared to female college students, male college students would exhibit more positive perceptions regarding a professional selling career. Hence, this study used 1-tailed significance values (family-wise  $\alpha = .05$ ) in the tests conducted to study potential differences in perceptions between males and females at the beginning of the semester. All other tests evaluating gender differences were two-tailed (family wise  $\alpha = .05$ ). The mean scores of males and females indicated that males scored higher than females on all 10 items that referred to the desirability of a sales career, and several of these differences resulted in a  $p \leq .05$ . After comparing against a critical  $\alpha = .0104$  for the entire family of tests, however, only the statement that “a career in professional selling would be fun and exciting” was statistically significant ( $p = .0095$ ) for the 1-tailed test (see Table 4). Accordingly, the authors concluded that male respondents had more favorable perceptions than females on this item at the start of a professional selling course.

Data collected at the end of the course [Phase 2] showed that for both males and females, mean perception scores on the 10 items related to their career perceptions increased. However, the mean difference between the males and females decreased and none of the comparisons were statistically significant at individual  $\alpha = .05$ . This suggests that the sampled respondents tended to converge with respect to their perceptions regarding a professional selling career after having completing the sales course.

ANOVA procedures were conducted to compare male and female students' perceptions regarding skill differences between two entry-level salespersons, one of whom had taken a college course in professional selling and one salesperson who had not completed such a course. Those analyses revealed that for all the eleven items, females reported higher mean scores than males. Keeping the family-wise  $\alpha = .05$ , and, consequently the critical  $\alpha = .0047$ , the following statistically significant results were observed (see Table 4). As compared to male students, female students perceived that the entry-level salesperson who took a college professional selling course would (a) possess superior communication skills ( $p = .001$ ), (b) be better prepared to prospect for new customers ( $p = .004$ ), and (c) be better prepared for success in a professional selling career ( $p = .004$ ) as compared to another entry-level salesperson who had did not do so.

The above analysis was also conducted with data procured at the end of the professional selling course [Phase 2]. Mean perception scores increased for both males and females, and females still scored higher than males. But the difference in the means between male and female students decreased when compared to similar data collected at the beginning of the course [Phase 1], and none of the differences were statistically significant at critical  $\alpha = .0047$ . For the sampled students, then, the perceptions of male and female students exhibited convergence at the end of the course [Phase 2].

The analysis further found that female students had significantly higher perception scores than did male students on the global statements that referred to (a) the importance of entry-level salespeople having had completed at least one professional selling course in college ( $p = .001$ ), and (b) the fact that college students are better prepared for a career in personal selling after completing a professional selling course

in college ( $p = .021$ ). Given the study findings stated above, these results are not surprising. Female students had more positive expectations from the professional selling course than did male students. As in the case of previous items, these perceptions improved for both male and female students towards the end of the semester, and although female students still reported higher mean perception scores, there did seem to be some convergence as the differences in means were reduced. Only one of these statements, i.e., the statement that referred to the usefulness of completing a college professional selling course was statistically significant ( $p = .028$ ). Table 4 also shows that at the beginning of the sales course, the means of both male and female students were not and there were no statistically significant differences between them for customer orientation-related items (6 items, critical  $\alpha = .0086$ ), nor for the questionnaire items related to societal perceptions of salespeople (4 items, critical  $\alpha = .0128$ ). In sum, both male and female student respondents evaluated these two dimensions similarly and negatively. At the end of the sales course, analyses showed improvements in perceptions of both males and females as evidenced through the improvement in the related mean perception scores. However, gender comparisons indicated only 2 statistically significant relationships. As compared to males, female students at the end of the semester perceived to a greater extent that (a) professional salespeople were less likely to make up information in order to sell their products ( $p = .01$ ), and male students perceived more favorably than females that (b) professional salespeople are thought of highly by others (see Table 4).

*Grade Point Average (GPA) Differences.* ANOVA tests were also conducted to examine perceptual differences on the various survey instrument items among students based on their academic achievement as measured by their overall GPA scores. Prior studies have found that students with higher GPA scores have lower perceptions regarding a professionally selling career. In this study, although the mean perception scores on most items were less favorable for individuals reporting a higher GPA, no statistically significant differences were observed between high performing students and other students in the sample. This lack of significance was observed in the data collected at the beginning as well as data collected at the end of the semester.

**Table 4: Gender Differences Before and After a Sales Course**

Variable	Female	Male	Female	Male	Source	SS	Df	F	SS	Df	F
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean		Before	Before	Before	After	After	After
	Before	Before	After	After							
For me, a sales related career would be fun and exciting	3.22	3.64	3.55	3.63	Between	5.98	1	<b>5.62*</b>	0.21	1	<b>0.15</b>
					Within	141.54	133		171.98	123	
					Total	147.53	134		172.192	124	
...possess superior oral communication skills	4.08	3.59	4.15	3.91	Between	8.06	1	<b>11.79**</b>	1.65	1	<b>2.24</b>
					Within	90.93	133		90.32	123	
					Total	98.99	134		91.97	124	
...be better prepared to prospect for new customers	4.22	3.84	4.40	4.14	Between	4.75	1	<b>8.75**</b>	2.04	1	<b>3.81</b>
					Within	72.24	133		65.77	123	
					Total	76.99	134		67.81	124	
...be better prepared for success in a professional selling career	4.29	3.91	4.40	4.07	Between	4.80	1	<b>8.35**</b>	3.33	1	<b>6.83</b>
					Within	76.46	133		59.84	123	
					Total	81.26	134		63.17	124	
It is important that entry level salespeople have completed at least one professional selling course while in college	4.51	3.91	4.58	4.21	Between	11.98	1	<b>10.55^</b>	4.16	1	<b>4.96^^</b>
					Within	151.10	133		103.17	123	
					Total	163.08	134		107.33	124	
After completing a professional selling course during their college career, students are better prepared for a career in professional selling	4.31	3.97	4.49	4.33	Between	3.65	1	<b>5.49^^</b>	0.81	1	<b>1.75</b>
					Within	88.46	133		57.19	123	
					Total	92.10	134		58.00	124	
Rather than admit they don't know the answer to a buyer's question, sales people often make something up	2.76	3.12	2.31	2.81	Between	4.20	1	<b>4.49</b>	7.86	1	<b>6.89***</b>
					Within	124.61	133		140.33	123	
					Total	128.81	134		148.19	124	
Most professional sales people are perceived favorably by others	2.71	2.80	2.65	3.07	Between	0.27	1	<b>0.38</b>	5.35	1	<b>8.25***</b>
					Within	96.14	133		79.075	122	
					Total	96.41	134		84.42	123	

\*critical  $\alpha < .0104$  \*\*critical  $\alpha < .0047$  \*\*\*critical  $\alpha < .0128$  ^ p. < .01 ^^ p. < .05

## Discussion and Implications

Prior research suggests that business students, as compared to non-business students, marketing students as compared to other students, and individuals that have enrolled in or taken one or more sales courses as compared to those who have not enrolled in or taken a sales course tend to have a more positive outlook towards the sales profession and towards salespeople (cf. Bristow, Gulati, and Amyx, 2006; Gulati, Bristow and Amyx, 2006; Sojka, Gupta, and Hartman, 2000). Findings in this study do echo some of these earlier findings as initially, respondents were somewhat positively oriented toward sales careers and toward the usefulness of a sales course to entry-level salespeople. However, these respondents also entered a sales class with some negative perceptions as they a) were not convinced that salespeople were customer oriented and b) held a negative image of salespeople overall. Therefore, it may be important that instructors teaching professional selling courses devote attention to not only teaching selling skills in these courses, but also strive to provide students with appropriate information, feedback, and exposure (thorough sales professionals, for example) so that college graduates are appropriately informed and therefore more receptive to a career in professional selling (cf. Sojka, Gupta, and Hartman, 2000). While the above implications and suggestions are not new, the findings of the current study reiterate the need to continually seek ways for students to develop realistic attitudes regarding professional selling and salespeople.

The results of this study indicate the college students' perceptions were, for certain dimensions, positively affected by taking a course in professional selling and that in several instances, those perceptions improved significantly. Significant improvements were also observed with respect to college student perceptions regarding customer orientation of salespeople and some negative perceptions regarding the image of salespeople in society decreased significantly. Generalized to all business students across the United States, the findings of this study provide more direct evidence of relationships between completion of a professional selling course and improvements in college students' perceptions towards salespeople and selling professions.

Given that not all perceptions improved significantly, a corollary to the findings in this study is that a single college course may not serve as a sufficient catalyst in changing certain largely erroneous beliefs and consequent negative attitudes that could have been formed over the years due to, amongst other reasons, one or more of the following: (a) a genuine lack of knowledge regarding, and awareness of, what salespeople do, (b) the stereotypical portrayal of salespeople as available through books, movies and public commentary, (c) an unfortunate experience in dealing with salespeople, or (d) an insufficient or non-existent exposure to business-to-business salespeople. To what extent will a greater number of courses be effective in developing correct perceptions in college students, a group that organizations look toward to meet their hiring needs in the sales area? Although previous scholars have approached this question (e.g., Sojka, Gupta, and Hartman, 2000), we still lack definitive answers.

In conclusion, this study shows a direct and positive link between taking a professional selling course and improvements in college students' sales and salespeople related perceptions. The results also provide evidence that greater "exposure" to such courses enhances college students' perceptions regarding their selling skill set and may potentially encourage them to pursue a career in sales, and that both female and male students tend to develop similar positive perceptions regarding selling and salespeople after "exposure" to a professional selling course. The study results also suggest that one or more professional selling courses at universities potentially benefit

hiring firms by providing them with a greater pool of knowledgeable candidates who possess appropriate perceptions about selling careers.

## Limitations and Future Research

The data procured could not be deemed to contain perfectly matched groups as a few students may have been not present in class on the days the survey instrument was administered. Given that all students present in class (representing almost the entire class) completed the questionnaire at two different points in time, we contend that the results of the study remain valid. This study also did not control for any extraneous influences throughout the semester that may or may not have colored student perceptions. Further, this study, did not examine differences in instructional styles of the instructors. Given that students had enrolled in this class, they may have been predisposed to respond favorably to the statements in the survey instrument. Given that this study found variability in responses across items at both data collection points, and that the study found differences in perception before and after the treatment (professional selling course), the authors contend that, given the research questions, any predisposition is not a weakness of the study. Of course, the ability to generalize findings from this study to the entire US college student population may be limited, given the demographic makeup of the respondents (largely Caucasian), and given that data was collected from a total of four universities only.

Future research that accounted for the above weaknesses would help improve the generalizability of the findings in this study. An area of inquiry stemming from the findings of this study includes a careful evaluation of the relationship between academic performance and student sales and salespeople related perceptions. Is the relationship best described as a U-shaped curve? Another potentially fertile area of study would comprise a longitudinal study that assesses the shift in student perceptions through exposure to one or more sales courses, and relationships between such shifts and beliefs, intentions, and actual behaviors as candidates and employees. Of course, studying the combined effect of more than one course in professional selling and or sales management on student perceptions could also potentially yield useful results for students, sales educators, and sales organizations.

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