

The Sales Education Renaissance



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While it's difficult to determine when sales was first taught in higher education, many universities did offer sales courses (sales management/sales) in the first half of the 20th century. Between the 1940s and the early 1980s, sales courses fell in and out of favor as scholars argued whether sales should be taught at universities or vocational schools. During that period, Georgia State University faculty members Mr. Lloyd Antle, Dr. William Harris, Dr. Henry Baker, and business professional Mr. Lewis F. Gordon believed strongly in sales and marketing education at the university level. And in 1952 (at Georgia State University), the four men established Pi Sigma Epsilon (PSE), the first professional fraternity for sales and marketing students (and industry professionals). While PSE chapters began appearing on college campuses around the country, the notion that sales should be taught (distinct from sales management) at the university level was slower to gain acceptance. However, a few key events occurred in the 1980s that would begin the sales education renaissance.

In 1981, the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* (JPSSM) became the first scholarly publication focusing on sales and sales management. In volume 1, issue 1, the editor wrote:

This issue represents the first publication that addresses expressly the research currently being conducted into the areas of Personal Selling and Sales Management. With this beginning, both practitioner and academician can find a locus to the literature rather than pursue an Odyssey through a variety of journals both within and outside of Marketing.

The original intent of the publisher, Pi Sigma Epsilon (PSE), was to create a publication outlet that would bring together sales academicians and practitioners in the advancement of sales and sales management thought and practice. Today,

JPSSM is arguably the most highly regarded academic journal focusing on selling and sales management.

In 1984, the American Marketing Association (AMA) held the first Faculty Consortium in Sales and Sales Management. Hosted by Texas Christian University, the consortium signified a renewed interest in sales research and education within the academy.

In January 1985, Baylor University established the first Center for Professional Selling. The objective was to differentiate Baylor's marketing degree and to increase professional opportunities for students. At that time, many universities were teaching sales (some even offering a sales major), but this was the first time a university formally recognized the value of sales to business schools and, subsequently, to the academy.

Later that same year, faculty from several universities who served as PSE chapter advisors held the first National Conference in Sales Management (NCSM). The conference was held in conjunction with the PSE National Convention and created to give faculty (PSE chapter advisors) a forum for presenting research so they could more readily be reimbursed (by their respective universities) for travel expenses associated with bringing students to the PSE National Convention.

Over the next decade, schools like the University of Memphis (known as Memphis State University at that time), the University of Florida, Indiana University, and Texas A&M began encouraging more doctoral dissertation work in sales. As a result of the rapidly growing interest in sales research and education, NCSM developed into a conference for sales scholars regardless of their affiliation with PSE. In addition, academicians (including the growing number of those recently completing their doctoral work in sales) began expanding sales offerings at their respective schools, creating sales role-play recording labs, and establishing partnerships with business organizations hungry for sales talent. During this time, a handful of schools began establishing sales centers similar to Baylor's.

As the 20th century drew to a close, two other significant events occurred that would accelerate the sales education renaissance that started in the 1980s. First, while attending the 1998 NCSM, Dr. Bill Weeks (Baylor University) and Dr. Ramon Avila (Ball State University) began discussing an idea to bring sales faculty from schools with sales centers together to work on ways to enhance sales education and help other schools establish sales centers of

excellence. Over the following months, Dr. Weeks and Dr. Avila invited other leaders (known as Directors) of sales centers together to flush out the idea. Although it would take a couple of years, that group would later form the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA). The second pivotal event occurred in 1999 when Dr. Terry Loe (a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Memphis) held the first National Collegiate Sales Competition (NCSC) at Baylor University. Thirteen schools attended that first competition, not knowing the significance NCSC would play in the coming years.

In 2002, faculty from Ball State University, Baylor University, Illinois State University, Kennesaw State University, Northern Illinois University, Ohio University, the University of Akron, the University of Houston, and the University of Toledo met on Ball State University's campus and formed the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA). The USCA immediately began working on ways to improve and expand sales education by sharing best practices, discussing sales research, and identifying ways to help faculty at other schools develop sales centers.

In 2003, Dr. Loe joined Kennesaw State University as an Assistant Professor and brought the NCSC with him. Kennesaw State University was eager to support NCSC, and as a result, the competition grew substantially over the next few years. More importantly, the number of companies sponsoring the competition grew as they saw the event as an annual opportunity to recruit the best sales talent from around the country. The success of the NCSC inspired other schools to begin offering sales competitions.

As those numbers grew, sales programs began generating significant interest from business school deans who saw sales and sales competitions as vehicles for driving student success and industry engagement.

2007 was another pivotal year in the sales education renaissance. First, 2007 was the year Howard and Sally Stevens established the Sales Education Foundation (SEF). The mission of the SEF was to elevate the sales profession through university education.

During the next few years, Howard, Sally, and others from the SEF assisted many universities by offering educational resources to support faculty teaching sales. The SEF also produced a PBS Special designed to help promote the sales profession among the general public. 2007 was also the year Dr. Ellen Pullins (University of Toledo) established the Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI). The goal of the GSSI is to unite the scientific research, teaching, and best practice of professional B2B selling & sales management around the globe.

GSSI brings together sales educators, scholars, and practitioners worldwide to further advance global collaboration in B2B sales research, practice, and education. Although it started small, GSSI would grow significantly over the next several years and was evidence the sales education renaissance wasn't limited to the United States.

By 2011, the demand for sales courses had grown significantly. To meet the need for teachers, many schools hired adjunct faculty

(non-tenure line) with significant industry experience to teach the sales courses. Dr. Leff Bonney (Florida State University) recognized the need to help those teachers make the transition to the classroom and, in collaboration with Dr. Greg Marshall (Rollins College), held the first Sales Educators' Academy (SEA) at Rollins College. The SEA became an annual conference bringing sales educators from around the world together to share ideas and best practices.

FAST FORWARD TO 2023

Between 2012 and 2023, sales education programs, organizations, and opportunities continued to grow. Here is a quick look at where the organizations described above are today.

- JPSSM (www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpss20/current) has published over 1000 sales-related research articles and is currently working on its 43 volume.
- NCSM (<https://pse.org/ncsm/>) is attended by sales scholars and educators from around the world who are interested in sharing research and sales education best practices. NCSM provides awards for best paper, best doctoral student paper, and best teaching innovation.
- NCSC (www.ncsc-ksu.org/) is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Over the past 25 years, thousands of students have competed and otherwise participated in the competition, selling Dayrunners, FedEx, UPS, Goldmine, Netsuite, ADP, and Gartner. The NCSC continues to be recognized as the premier national sales competition.
- The USCA (www.universitiesalescenteralliance.org/) now has over 70 members, including schools in Austria, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. It is working on expanding graduate sales education, promoting sales research, helping members attract and graduate students from underserved communities, and finding ways to serve the business community through outreach.
- The Sales Education Foundation (<https://salesfoundation.org/>) continues its mission of "Elevating the sales profession through university education," sponsoring sales research, providing content to sales faculty and students, and helping sales organizations connect sales talent at universities around the world.
- GSSI (<https://gssi.world/>) has been held in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. It now supports regional GSSI conferences and continues to connect academicians and practitioners.

We are still in a sales education renaissance because sales has yet to gain international acceptance as a business discipline (like Accounting, Finance, Management, Marketing, Advertising, Public Relations, and so forth). Nevertheless, it's impressive to see the size, strength, and scope this movement has achieved. Moving forward, the post-covid era of virtual selling and the expansion of AI will continue to influence and change how sales is practiced. The close relationship between practitioner and academic, a hallmark of sales education, will ensure sales students are prepared to embrace those changes and be successful. ▲