

■ SHAWNEE VICKERY, Feature Editor, Michigan State University

Opportunities for Research in Purchasing Management

by Joseph R. Carter, Arizona State University

Over the last decade there has been a concerted effort by many influential academics and practitioners to promote the development of purchasing and supply management courses and programs at universities and colleges across the U.S. These efforts have been predicated on the assumption that if more universities sponsor purchasing and supply management programs, the number of graduates seeking employment in the field of purchasing will increase, thereby enhancing the professional stature of the function. The establishment of the "N.A.P.M. Professorship" program, the "Doctoral Student Grant" program, and the "Academic Research Symposium," are examples of efforts by one practitioner group, the National Association of Purchasing Management, to foster purchasing educational and research endeavors.

The idea of providing systematic training in the area of purchasing and supply management is not new. In 1965, more than 300 universities and colleges in the United States reported that they regularly taught purchasing courses in various formats as part of their business school curricula [3]. More recent studies have shown that there are in excess of forty universities and colleges that have formal purchasing programs that award degrees at the baccalaureate level or masters level or both [1] [2]. All these institutions diligently strive to provide a quality education in purchasing to hundreds of eager students. Some of these programs are deemed more successful than others and enjoy a positive

reputation with academics and practitioners. Some programs attract the attention of corporate recruiters from across the country, some do not. Why are there differences between academic and practitioner perceptions of the status and performance of purchasing programs? The answer may lie in an assessment of the efficacy of the research performed by academics at these institutions.

Historically, practitioners have been quite critical of the type and quality of academic research. They don't feel that academics are finding answers to question that are most significant to their operations. Practitioners are not demanding that researchers abandon the rigorous research methodologies developed over the last several decades, but instead they advocate a combination of rigor with direct observation of the phenomena under study. Yes, practitioners are advocating the empirical validation of results. Purchasing and supply management academics must spend more time in organizations observing business practices in action. Results of research efforts need to be tested directly in relevant business settings.

In addition, an integrative approach to problem solving is required. Real world problems can no longer be classified as simply "purchasing issues." The range of inquiry must be broadened to include interaction and communication across the boundaries of functional academic disciplines. The effective solution to a realistic problem may require the inquiry by faculty from several different academic departments. Such broader approaches will provide the means to accomplish new syntheses between research rigor and relevance and close the perceptual gap between academics and practitioners.

Beyond the new synthesis of academic rigor and managerial relevance mentioned above, the fluid context of the business environment today calls for

a more direct collaboration among academic and business organizations. The creative interchanges of such collaborations can help bring about a new blend between research, knowledge, and education. They foster the interdisciplinary focus that most managerial problems require.

Where does an academic go to uncover fruitful areas for research in purchasing and supply management? These areas are not often found in academic textbooks or prestigious journals. Granted, research that germinates from other research is a valid academic paradigm. But this paradigm can produce a "stutter step" of progress, not always in the right direction. How can academics identify areas of research which can provide quantum leaps in productivity, that is, "breakthrough research" opportunities? The answer to this question lies within business establishments themselves, in identifying strategic and tactical trends within purchasing and supply management and designing research streams around these directions.

On September 1, 1993, a research project was initiated which could significantly impact the field of purchasing and supply management over the next decade and beyond. This project is called "The Purchasing Futures Research Project" and is sponsored by the Center for Advanced Purchasing Studies (CAPS). The project's goals are to develop a vision for what the purchasing function will look like in the future—roles, responsibilities, capabilities, organization, etc., and use this vision of the future to identify areas for "breakthrough research." There are critical forces changing the way companies operate and these forces are having a significant impact on the purchasing and supply management functions. Many of these forces are occurring in functions outside purchasing and supply management.



Joseph R. Carter is Associate Professor of Purchasing and Logistics Management in the College of Business Administration at Arizona State University. Dr. Carter holds a D.B.A. degree in operations management from the Boston University Graduate School of Management and is recognized as a Certified Purchasing Manager by the National Association of Purchasing Management.

As part of this project, a computer-assisted, interactive assessment of what leaders in the purchasing and supply management field felt were the critical issues impacting this field during the next five years and the implications of these issues for their industries. This assessment was performed with the cooperation of more than seventy purchasing and supply management top-level executives at the 1994 Executive Purchasing Roundtable held in Phoenix on February 27th. The results of this effort may assist academics to identify important areas for research during the second half of the 1990s.

Purchasing Futures

The most significant purchasing and supply management trends identified during the Executive Purchasing Roundtable can be seen in Table 1.

The implications of these responses is that effective management of the supply chain through the efficient use of new information technologies, the selective use of strategic alliances with key suppliers and better strategic integration of supply plans into the corporate strategy will drive the development of the purchasing and supply management function into the next century.

In contrast, the least important trends identified by these executive can be seen in Table 2.

Item Description	Group Average*	N
1. Increased Use of Information Technologies	6.2	73
2. Total Cost of Ownership for Decision Making	6.0	72
3. Supplier Strategic Alliances	6.0	72
4. Use of Strategic Sourcing Plans	5.9	72

*Assessed using a seven point Likert scale.

Table 1: Most significant purchasing and supply management trends.

Item Description	Group Average	N
1. Shifting from Cost Reduction to Cost Avoidance	4.6	70
2. Third-party Purchasing	4.6	58
3. Co-location of Supplier and Buying Firms	4.7	55
4. Flattening the Purchasing Organization	4.8	72

Table 2: Least significant purchasing and supply management trends.

The group sentiment was not that these tactics and trends were of little importance, but that they were "accomplished" goals. For example, the executive vehemently stated that they had been flattening the organizations structure within their firms for several years and most of the work in this area had been accomplished.

As academics, what can we do with this information? At the least, we can use this information to develop a list of industry "wants" for research. Preferably, such information will actually direct selected research efforts and lead to

productive collaborations between industry and academe.

References

- [1] Henry, Alison. Purchasing education: Institutions offering programs. *NAPM Insights*, October 1992, 25-27.
- [2] Murphree, Julie. What's new in formal purchasing program. *NAPM Insight*, August 1990, 10-13.
- [3] *The Bulletin of the National Association of Purchasing Agents*. Purchasing education in American colleges. June 23, 1965, 2. ■

TQM Workshop at Memphis State University

The Educational and Research Foundation of APICS and Memphis State University are sponsoring a summer workshop focusing on the implementation of quality improvement initiatives in academia. This workshop will provide participants the opportunity to learn (1) what is being done; (2) how it is being done; (3) who is doing it; and (4) what can be expected when it comes to adopting a quality improvement focus on campus. The workshop is scheduled for July 31st-August 2nd, 1994, at the Memphis State University Fogelman Executive Center in Memphis, TN.

The workshop will begin at noon on Sunday with a presentation on "Quality and Accreditation of Business Schools." Dr. James Pope, Dean of the John L. Grove College of Business, Shippensburg University, will discuss the AACSB accreditation standards and their relationship to quality improvement efforts on campus. Throughout the workshop, presentations will be made by IBM (Market-Driven Quality) and Federal Express. Monday evening will be highlighted by a tour of the Federal Express Super-Hub in Memphis as the facility sorts and distributes the evening packages. Also of interest should be the

presentation from the Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Houston and the Rochester Institute of Technology. These schools were among the eight recipients of the IBM grants to implement TQM on campus. The workshop will also provide ample time for networking, brainstorming and panel discussions that address a range of TQM implementation issues. ■

Contact:
 Wendy Whittaker
 APICS E&R Foundation
 1-800-444-2742 Ext. 331
 Fax: 1-703-237-8450 Attn: Wendy