STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF GUEST SPEAKERS IN MARKETING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Guest speakers can form a valuable real-world adjunct to classroom education in marketing, but student perceptions of specific speakers can vary widely. This paper examines factors in student perceptions of guest speakers, using quantitative factor ratings from a student survey, a content analysis of qualitative discussions of excellent and poor speaker experience, and differences across class year and major.

INTRODUCTION

Guest speakers from industry have become an important part of the educational experience for marketing students, and supplement the pedagogical goals of marketing education with exposure to the real-world experience of successful practitioners. Given these objectives, marketing faculty may be inclined use criteria such as the speaker's industry, experience, or position to select classroom speakers. At the same time, student assessment of a good class speaker experience appears to revolve around quantifiable factors that often go far beyond the speaker's expertise. In this paper, we examine the factors that lead to how students perceive these guest speakers, as well as the variation of these factors with demographic factors such as class year and academic major, to help establish guidelines for selecting effective speakers.

It is clear from the literature that when effectively and correctly used, the inclusion of guest speakers as one pedagogical tool of an overall varied educational experience can enrich the overall learning experience of the students. The benefits of such guest speakers include enhanced student learning as well improved relations between university/academia and community/industry.

One important learning benefit derived from guest speakers is an enhancement of the educational experience as a result of giving students real world knowledge experiences, insights and perspectives for their particular fields and disciplines (Glenwick & Chabot 1991, Metrejean & Zarzeski 2001, Sniezak 2005). In particular, Glenwick and Chabot concluded that a course that emphasized and utilized a series of guest speakers was "successful in enhancing understanding of clinical child psychology through bringing students to the real world and the real world to students." Metrejean & Zarzeski asserted that a panel comprised of accounting professionals representing a cross-section of the accounting field provided the benefit of bringing the "branches of the accounting professionals together where students can explore their similarities and differences and see how the related to the business cultures at large".

The learning environment can also be enhanced by providing guest speakers aimed at improving students' recognition and awareness of both cultural and gender diversity (Butler 1997, Murray & Bollinger 2001, Nourse 1995). Butler concluded that that use of female guest speakers provided the students with the opportunity to interact with successful female professionals and role models, and further this opportunity to observe and interact with successful women business executives and leaders "helped to reduce the gender bias that seems to permeate the minds of male students in the management area". Nourse indicated that use of a guest speaker having experience in intercultural communication may be a means for integrating a multicultural communication topic within a business communication course, with the ultimate result being students having "an increased interest and awareness of the importance of multicultural communication skills".

Other scholars and academics have asserted that the use of guest speakers can function to promote an active learning environment (Robinson & Kakela 2006). Rather than utilizing a learning environment where students sit passively as their professor delivers information by lecture, a learning environment that does not promote engaged learning, Robinson & Kakela propose using guest speakers as an "active leaning" alternative using interactive approaches as a means to "demonstrate multiple ways of seeing and knowing" a particular field. As stated by Nourse (1995), the use of guest speakers can add variety and "spice" to the classroom while at the same time augmenting the other teaching tools such as lectures, while at least one scholar has suggested that "creativity in education", including the use of outside speakers (Fatt 2000), is important for the success of future educators.

An added benefit of guest speakers is the contribution to building important linkages between the academic and university setting and the community at large (Sniezak 2005, Wortmann 1992). As succinctly stated by Sniezek, "guest speakers are not only useful [in the classroom] but also help to build important ties between the university and the community". The use of guest speakers in the classroom can also create, as well improve, the connection between academia and practitioners in industry (Glenwick & Chabot 1991, Metrejean & Zarzeski 2001). Creating and/or improving this academia/industry connection through the use of guest speakers can lead to networking opportunities for both professors and students alike, as well the opportunity for industry to potentially meet students that might fulfill employment needs.

The objective of this study was to understand what factors lead to student perceptions of guest speakers, which in turn influence their effectiveness as an educational experience. By understanding these factors, their variation among different types of students, and their evolution over the time span of a college education, instructors can more effectively evaluate and select appropriate guest speakers to enrich the learning experience in their classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was distributed via electronic mail to over 300 students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast shortly after the end of the spring semester, designed to assess both quantitative and qualitative ratings of factors behind both excellent and poor guest speaker experiences, as well as capture demographic information about the respondents. A total of 80 responses were received. This survey was designed as follows:

I. Demographic information

The following questions were asked to classify the demographics of the respondents:

- What year did or do you expect to graduate from college?
- What is your major or specialization?

II. Quantitative factors

Students were asked to rate the following descriptions as Poor, Average, Good, or Excellent, to indicate how they felt about these descriptions towards their ability to learn from a guest speaker in the classroom:

1. Brings the field into the classroom
2. Offers varying view points
3. Relevance of cases/application stories to the subject matter
4. Offers something different in the classroom
5. Networking opportunities with an individual in the field
6. Providing "insiders" view of the field
7. Being "fun" and "engaging" presenter
8. Offering excellent content
9. Providing specific facts and statistics to the presentation
10. Allowing "Q&A" session at the end of the presentation

III. Qualitative factors

Students were also asked three questions designed to elicit quantitative responses about their experiences with guest speakers in the classroom. A content analysis was performed on these responses to identify response categories and trends.

- Please list any bad experiences you have had with a guest speaker in the classroom.
- What is your perception of characteristics of an EXCELLENT guest speaker?
- What is your perception of characteristics of a POOR guest speaker?

Class years surveyed ranged from entering freshmen (class of 2010) to recent graduates (class of 2005). All students surveyed, with the exception of the entering freshman class, had taken an entry-level class in the principles of marketing. Results from the survey questions listed above were coded as followed:

- Class year was coded by its four-digit year.
- Major and specialization values were grouped into one of the following overall categories: Business (including accounting, marketing, economics and management), Education (including childhood, elementary and general education), Social Science (including anthropology, psychology), and Liberal Arts and other areas (including English, history and theater, undeclared majors and others).
- Quantitative factors were tabulated as total counts of poor, average, good and excellent ratings, across the total survey sample and by demographic group.
- Characteristics of "excellent" speakers were qualitatively grouped into one of the following categories, based on a content analysis:
    - Presentation aids: Uses visuals such as handouts or PowerPoint slides, well-prepared.
    - Motivational aids: Uses real-life examples, real-world stories, examples.
    - Positive platform skills: High energy, friendly, passionate, easy to understand, engaging.
    - Positive attitude: Talks "to" rather than "at" students, respectful.
    - Positive climate: Interested in being there, encourages student interaction, relates well.
- Characteristics of "poor" speakers and bad speaker experiences were qualitatively grouped into one of the following five categories, based on a content analysis:
    - Unprepared: Disorganized, did not have a focus or goal.
    - Boring: Read from slides, lacked energy, enthusiasm, and passion.
    - Negative platform skills: No eye contact, spoke too fast, was inaudible, spoke in a monotone.
    - Negative attitude: Talks "at" rather than "to" students, arrogant and disrespectful, defensive, rigid.
    - Negative climate: Seems uninterested, talks about themselves, doesn't relate to students.

These quantitative and qualitative factors were compiled for all respondents as a group, and then correlated against student responses for class year and major to examine how these factors vary for specific student groups and preferences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student perceptions of guest speakers reflect a fundamental truth about their selection – that while content is important, and becomes more important for individual majors or as a student gets close to graduation, the ability of a speaker to relate to and interact effectively with students is a key factor in their overall ratings by students. Specific findings were as follows:

1. Overall student perceptions of guest speakers

As an overall group, students valued factors that engaged and entertained them most highly. While content-related factors were likely to get ratings of "good" or above, two of the three highest levels of "excellent" ratings involved interaction-related factors, e.g. being different from the classroom experience, and allowing question and answer sessions. Figure 1 shows a distribution of these quantitative responses.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 compares the distribution for two factors, providing specific facts and statistics versus being different from the classroom experience, highlighting the importance of these interaction-related factors. Furthermore, two key content-related factors, providing an insider's view and providing specific facts and statistics, were the only factors rated "poor" by more than 1% of the respondents, at 5% and 8% respectively. This indicates that the student experience has a strong relationship with the presenter's abilities to connect with students, versus expertise alone.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Among qualitative factors, a content analysis of the responses showed that platform skills and "climate", e.g. the presenter's ability to relate to students, rated most highly in evaluations of both poor and excellent class speakers. Details of these results are shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

2. Student perceptions versus class year

Analysis of qualitative factors by class year showed a clear bifurcation of results, as outlined for both positive and negative factors in Figure 4. In general entering freshmen, who have generally had no exposure to the college classrooms, tend to rate most factors relatively equally, while students just completing their sophomore year valued platform skills and climate issues most highly, and students who had recently graduated valued content-related factors more highly. This indicates that students who are closer to graduation evolve to become more concerned about what they will learn from a guest speaker presentation over time.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

3. Student perceptions versus academic major

Given that the survey sample was based largely on students who had taken an introductory marketing course, a majority of respondents selected business as an academic major. Among these students, speaker platform skills and classroom interaction (e.g. culture factors) ranked most highly for both positive and negative speaker characteristics. Within smaller sample sizes for education, social science and liberal arts students, negative factors were more uniformly ranked overall by these majors, while platform skills still represented the most highly-ranked factor among each of these groups. This underscores the importance of such platform skills for all groups, and a preference for greater interaction among business students that warrants future investigation with larger sample sizes of students from other academic majors.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

SUMMARY

The results of this survey demonstrated that student perceptions of guest speakers hinge most critically around factors other than just content and subject matter – and in particularly, around skills that involve building a connection with the student. Quantitative factors rated most highly include being "different" in a good way, providing inside information, and interacting with the students via questions and answers, while a content analysis of qualitative responses found that factors such as platform skills and presentation climate weighed heavily in the perception of a poor versus excellent speaker. There is a clear trend over time for students to value platform skills and culture more highly at the mid-point of their college tenure, particularly among business students, while content-related factors are rated more highly following graduation. These results underscore the importance of assessing speaking skills and empathy with student audiences in selecting a guest speaker, as well as subject matter expertise.

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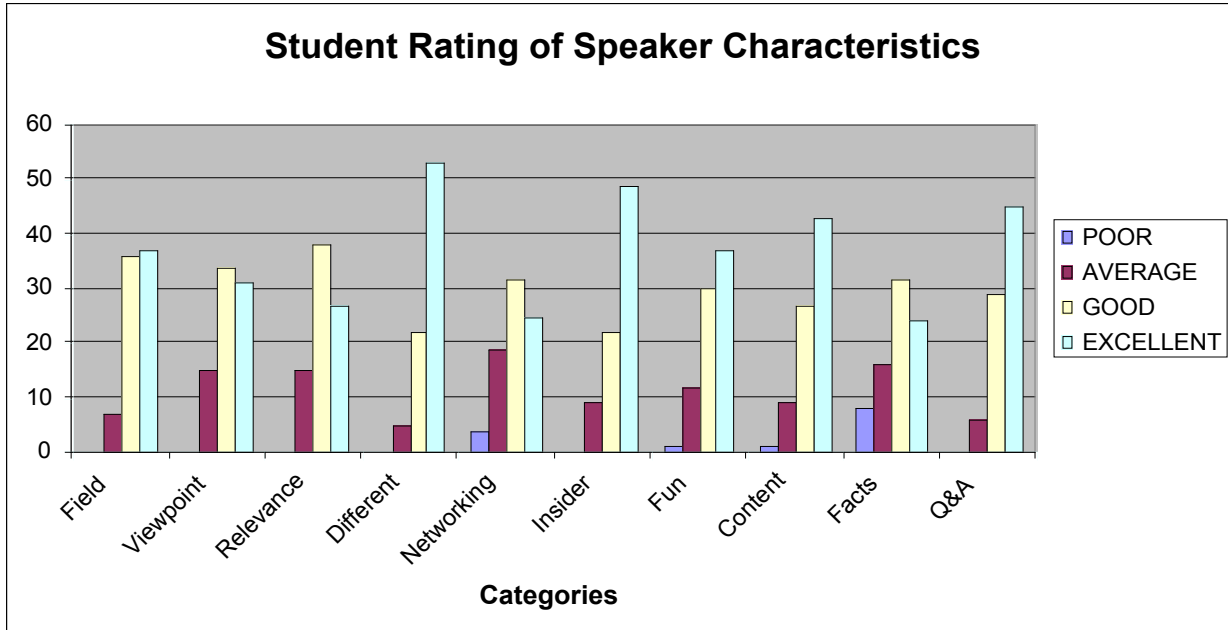
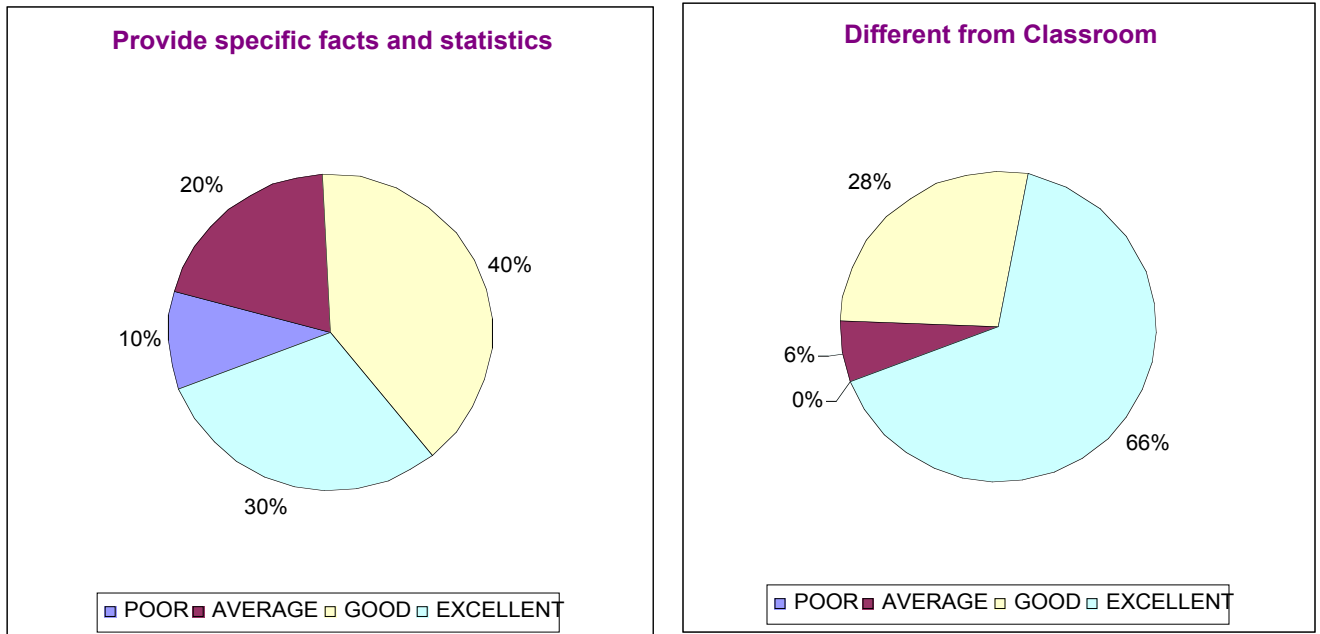**Figure 1. Student ratings of quantitative speaker characteristics.**

Figure 2. Breakdown of rankings between two factors, Providing Specific Facts and Statistics versus Being Different from the Classroom Experience.
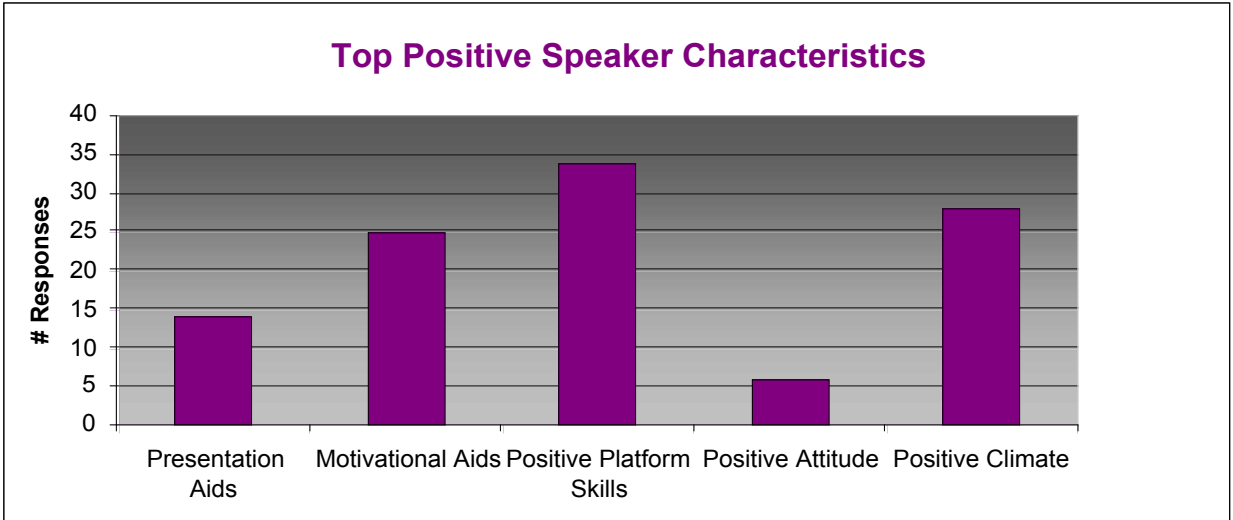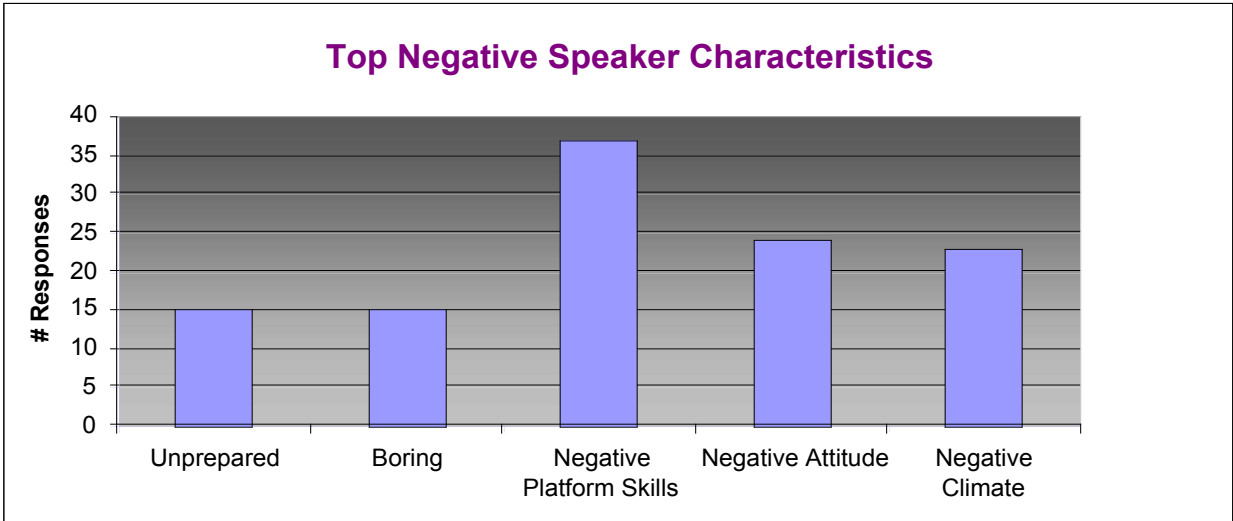
Top Negative Speaker Characteristics

Top Positive Speaker Characteristics

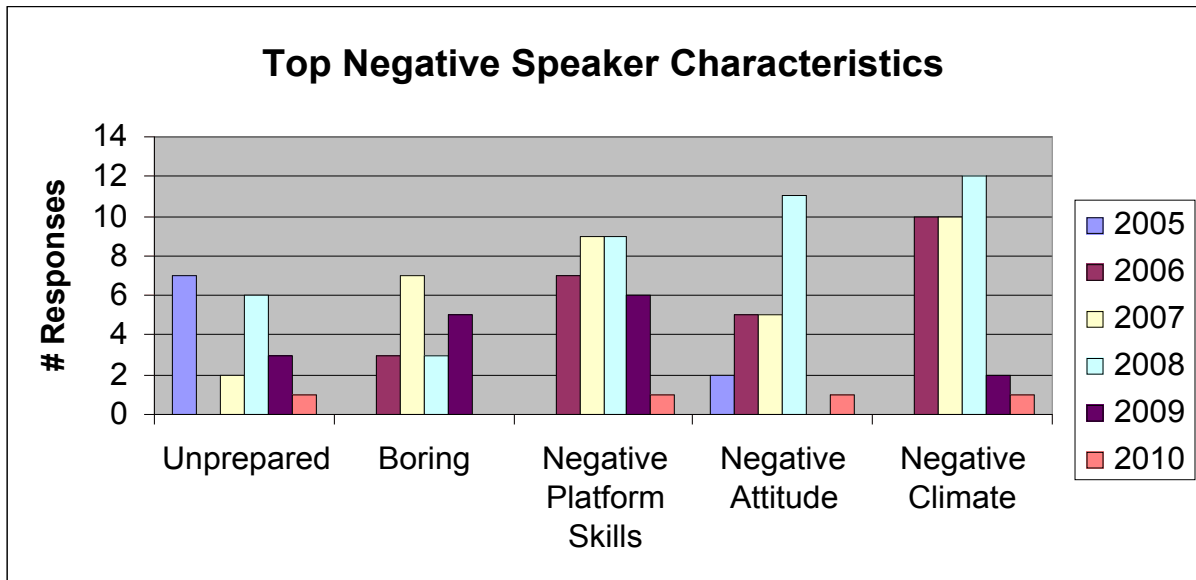**Figure 3. Overall rankings of negative and positive qualitative factors.**

Top Negative Speaker Characteristics

Responses

Categories: Unprepared, Boring, Negative Platform Skills, Negative Attitude, Negative Climate

Legend: 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

Top Positive Speaker Characteristics

Responses

Categories: Presentation Aids, Motivational Aids, Positive Platform Skills, Positive Attitude, Positive Climate

Legend: 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

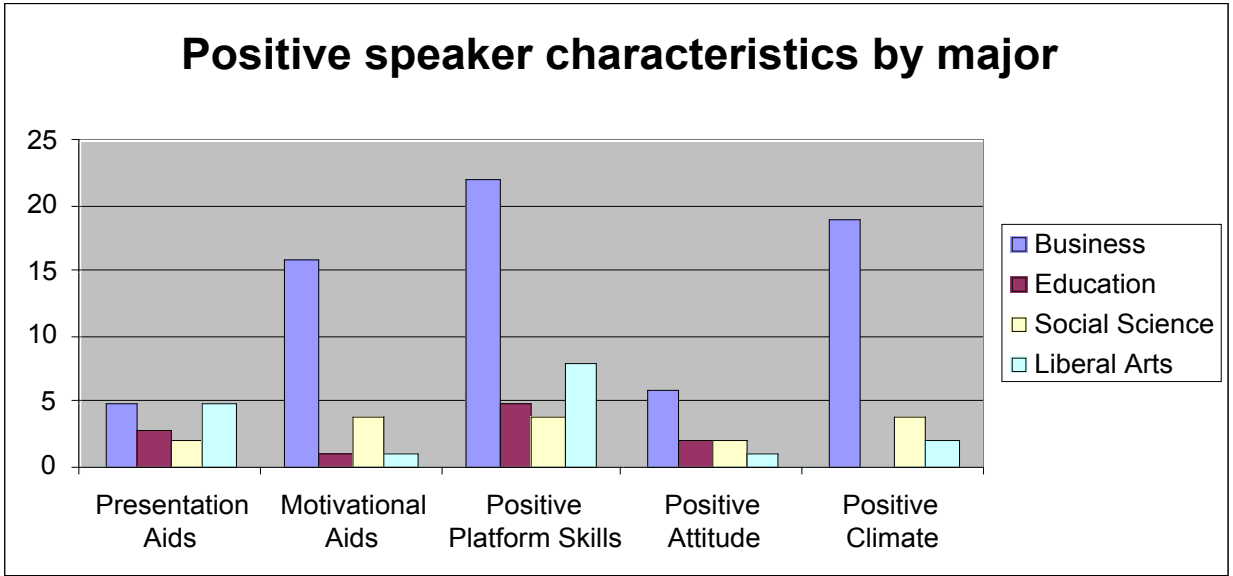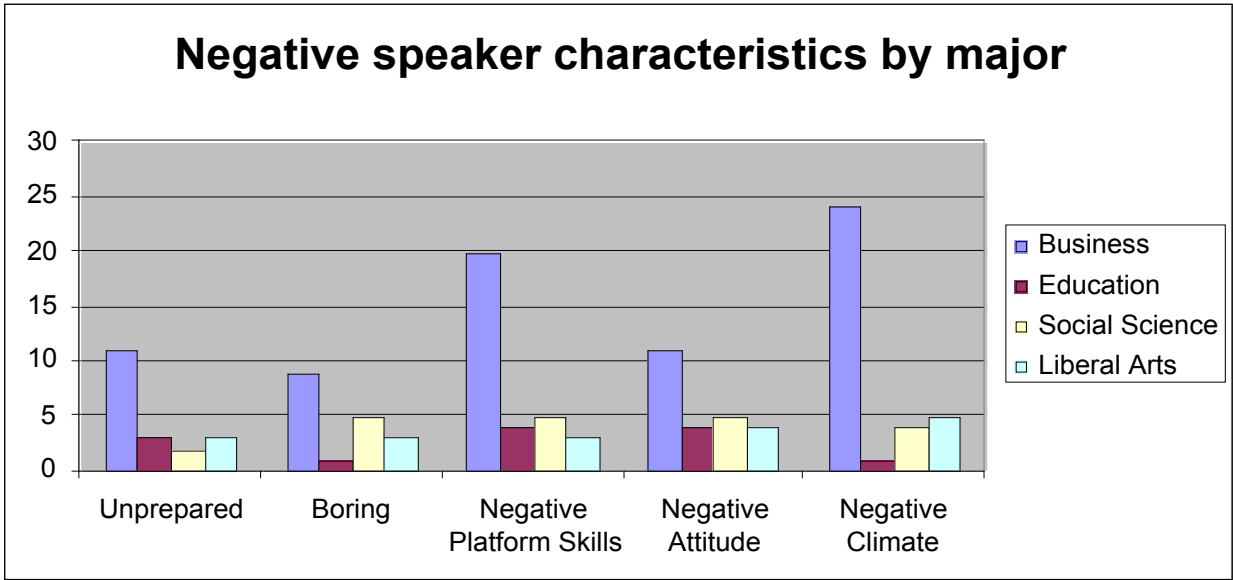**Figure 4. Rankings of top negative and positive characteristics by class year.**

Figure 5. Rankings of negative and positive speaker characteristics by academic major.