**Customer Service in Higher Education: Finding a Middle Ground**

[**http://dus.psu.edu/mentor/2012/06/customer-service-in-higher-education/**](http://dus.psu.edu/mentor/2012/06/customer-service-in-higher-education/)

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In the business world, customer service is a prized commodity as it directly impacts the bottom line. Given the struggling economy, traditional higher education institutions are dealing with decreased revenues and searching for ways to do more with less. One way for colleges and universities to accomplish this objective is to place a renewed focus on meeting or exceeding the expectations and needs of their customers, namely their students. One could argue that the meteoric rise in student enrollment at for-profit institutions is a wake-up call to traditional colleges and universities and an indicator that students are seeking education opportunities in outlets that meet their customer service needs. But what does customer service in a traditional higher education environment look like? The purpose of this paper is to explain the pros and cons of treating students as customers and to suggest ways of infusing customer-service principles into academia whether or not one is comfortable identifying students as customers.

**Customer Service in Higher Education**

What should customer service in higher education settings look like? Turban, Lee, King, and Chung (2002) posit, “Customer service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction—that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the customer’s expectation” (p. 87). Customer service is performed in most of our educational institutions today and there are even departments dedicated to providing student services. However, real customer service must involve more than a department or a handful of individuals. Providing a true service-centered environment is everyone’s job. That emphasis must start at the top and the inspiration for delivering has to be more than lip service. Some would argue that higher education has focused less on the process of good customer service and more on the final product of producing educated graduates. If students fulfill all of the course requirements set before them, the institution awards them a diploma in recognition of their accomplishment. Colleges and universities have not been as concerned about whether students felt satisfied while completing their degree requirements. Institutions tend to emphasize instead that students need to work hard while at college to complete their degrees. Emery, Kramer and Tian (2001) said, “Students may not be excited about the hard work in the short run, but in the long run, the students will be very appreciative of the quality education that prepared them for the real world” (p. 8). But, should the end product of a diploma be the only concern of higher education institutions? We will now explore both the pros and cons of treating students as a customer.

**The Pros to Treating Students as Customers**

Just as taking good care of customers typically results in increased profitability for businesses, higher education institutions that seek to attract and retain their customers (i.e. students) would be well served to also treat their customers well. The advantages of this approach include increased customer satisfaction and loyalty. Taking care of customers should lead to increased retention, which is an increasingly important revenue source for higher education institutions. The bottom line is institutions of higher education need students to survive and thrive. Commenting about the relationship of students and higher education, Bejou (2005) stated, “The longer these ongoing transactions are satisfactory to both parties, the longer the relationship will endure, to the benefit of everyone” (p. 1).

To better serve students, Ewers (2010) suggested that institutions have employees attend customer service training sessions to learn the basics of customer service. Yet many in academia find this a hard pill to swallow. Regarding the benefits of good customer-student relationships, Emery et al. (2001) remarked, “Student-customer satisfaction directly correlates to larger enrollments: Happy student stay in school, so retention rates remain high; happy students tell their high-school friends, so recruitment numbers are higher ….” (p. 2). More students mean more tuition revenue. Bejou (2005) spoke about buyer’s satisfaction—given that students pay for their education—by saying, “If the quality of the initial encounter is good, and the ongoing relationship is strong, satisfaction and loyalty remain high” (p. 46). Vaill (2008) further pointed out, “Education is clearly a service, not a product … in higher education; they have to be mindful of, responsive to the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the student” (p. 1).

**The Cons to Treating Students as Customers**

To counter the students-are-customers paradigm, Demetriou (2008) argued, “Satisfaction is not an appropriate gauge of quality in higher education. In business, the customer is always right; however, in education the student is not always right” (¶ 4). She argued that an important part of college involves students learning from their mistakes and facing the consequences of their actions. There are dangers to colleges and universities competing for customers. Vaill (2008) went on to say*,* “Higher education has to be careful not to think of the student as a customer in the conventional sense assumed by a profit-oriented business” (p. 1). Businesses compete for customers. Schools of higher learning, on the other hand, should work hard to attract the best students. Institutions need to be careful that as they “compete” for students, they do not mislead prospective students about what life on campus will be like.

Clearly there is a need for a middle ground in the discussion about customer service as it relates to students in higher education.

**The Middle Ground**

Regardless whether one calls students “customers” or not, there are some basic tenets of the customer-service paradigm that could and should be utilized in higher education settings. Demetriou (2008) noted, “The quality of service we provide to students is important” (¶ 9). Thus, there are some specific tips that academic advisers and other institutional officials can follow to provide quality service:

1. Treat students with dignity and respect. This is a basic human necessity and right.
2. Give students clear directions on how to solve their problems and issues. Students should not be given the runaround. Students are at college to study and learn, not go on a wild goose chase all over campus trying to find the answers to simple questions.
3. Be responsive to students and their parents. “If you tell a parent you will call them back today, then call them back today” (Ewers, 2010, p. 2). Being true to your word means a lot to students and their families.
4. Give timely answers to students’ questions and regular feedback on their progress.

Bejou (2005) suggested adopting customer relationship management (CRM) as a way of establishing and maintaining the relationship between the student and the higher education institution. CRM comes from research on interpersonal relationships. Bejou (2005) believed when CRM is applied to the school’s organizational structure, it could help administrators to more effectively allocate funds or resources to enhance the school’s recruitment, retention, progression, and enrollment management of students. Wallace (2010) compiled “15 Principles for Complete Customer Service.” Higher education could take some of these principles and reformat them as a way to reach a middle ground in the discussion about students as customers and develop a CRM plan. Here are the higher-education versions of seven of Wallace’s (2010, ¶ 7) fifteen principles for customer service:

1. The success of the institution is dependent upon providing high-quality service to students. Students affect the bottom line.
2. Employees need to be reminded that every single one of them, regardless of their level of interaction with students, is in the business of serving students. Everything is woven together in the institution, and students deserve to receive assistance to meet their legitimate needs.
3. When it comes to experiencing service satisfaction, perception is reality in the minds of every student. It is important to understand the student in order to deliver service in a manner that is perceived to be satisfying to the student.
4. Each student is unique, thus it is important to understand the unique qualities of each student in order to provide service that meets their individual needs.
5. Employees should follow a variation of the Golden Rule by treating students the way that they would want their son or daughter to be treated.
6. It is hard to recover from a mistake, so when it comes to service to students every effort should be made to do it right the first time.
7. There is a need to solicit feedback from students at all times and then listen, especially when it hurts. How else can a high level of service be measured?

The other eight principles do not translate as easily to higher education. Bejou and Wallace both studied customer service but from different perspectives. Bejou regarded the organization as a whole and considered what employees can do to treat students like customers. He also looked at personal effort and creativity within the organization to provide customer service (Bejou, 2005). Wallace addressed the total concept of customer service, not just the organization. Wallace suggested that individuals think outside the box to provide customer service (Wallace, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Regardless of our level of comfort when referring to students as customers, the bottom line is that there are principles from the customer service literature that higher education institutions can adopt to empower students to be successful. Instead of getting caught up in the semantics of what to call students, the focus should deliberately shift to helping students make the most of their experiences on our college campuses. By infusing principles from the customer service literature, institutions of higher education can help retain and graduate their students.

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