

RETHINKING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: STUDENT AS CUSTOMER OR EMPLOYEE?

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Abstract

This discussion offers clarity about whether faculty members should conceptualize students as customers or as employees in the classroom. It posits that the construct of *student engagement* is quite similar to *employee engagement*. Moreover, it concludes that principles and behaviors that help managers build engaged employees in the workplace have strikingly similar counterparts for faculty members in the classroom. The meaning of engagement is addressed, as well as the specific behaviors and leadership styles that can contribute to a general learning environment and characteristics of the learning process which lead to desirable outcomes both for the student and for the university. In an educational setting, the outcomes of engagement include greater knowledge attainment, student participation in learning opportunities outside of the classroom, a commitment to lifelong learning, loyalty to the university demonstrated through advocacy and alumni relations, and a larger contribution to society as a whole. Finally, the perspective described here has significant implications for classroom pedagogy and for faculty members who must play a pivotal role in building student engagement in learning.

Introduction

“Engaged learning and engaged learners are increasingly cited as critical factors in producing significant learning” (Young, 2010, p.1). “Learning begins with student engagement” (Shulman, 2002, p. 37). If one accepts these assertions, several questions follow for educators to answer, including: What does it mean for a student to be “engaged” in learning? And, is it possible for educators to influence students’ learning engagement? What is the best conceptualization of both the student and the faculty member for achieving student engagement in learning, as well as desirable learning outcomes?

What is Student Engagement?

“While student engagement is a concept with educational potential, there are diverse and contradictory meanings attached to the concept and, therefore, many different models of student engagement” (Harris, 2010, p. 132). Reviewing 44 studies of student engagement, Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004) identified three categories of engagement: behavioral,

emotional, and cognitive. As well, variability exists in terms of the conceptual scope of student engagement. For example, research in the United Kingdom viewed “the student as consumer, co-producer or member of a learning community” (Little & Williams, 2010, p. 117), but the primary focus of study in this case was on students’ larger role in university governance. Bowen (2005) identified four types of engagement: with the learning process, with the object of study, with contexts of the subject of study, and with the human condition. In contrast to broader scopes of student engagement, this discussion focuses on *student engagement in learning in the classroom or course context* – a narrower, but no less important, scope of engagement. Schreiner (2010) reported: “The higher students’ level of engaged learning, the more satisfied they are with the learning process . . . and the greater learning gains they report while in college” (p. 4).

Student engagement at the classroom level is discussed in terms of 1) specific student behaviors regarding faculty members (*e.g.*, discussing grades/ideas/career plans, working with faculty outside the classroom); 2) community-based activities (*e.g.*, a project, a practicum, volunteer work); and 3) transformational learning opportunities (*e.g.*, study abroad, a “senior experience”) (Carle *et al*, 2009). To establish clear boundaries of inquiry for this discussion: Its focus will be on interactions between students and professors in a classroom setting, including virtual classrooms (*e.g.*, Watwood, Nugent, & Deihl, 2009). Chen, Lattuca, & Hamilton (2008) “propose that high levels of faculty engagement . . . will promote student engagement and student learning” (p. 339). Although they make a good case for the faculty member’s role in student engagement, they do not specifically offer a framework to inform that role. It is appropriate first, however, to determine the *role of the student* in learning engagement. A conceptualization of that role which is prominent in scholarly research is “student as customer.”

Student as Customer

“While references to ‘student as customer’ long predate the 1990s, it appears to have been the movement toward Edward Deming’s total quality management (TQM) that most brought about the changed perception among higher education administrators” (George, 2007, pp. 966-967). At least among collegiate *marketing* educators, there could be a strong inclination to think of students as customers (*e.g.*, Padlee, Kamaruddin, & Baharun, 2010; Hurdle, 2004), and to apply marketing concepts to the “business” of higher education (*e.g.*, Miller & Cluff, 1985). Hammond & Webster (2011) studied the *market focus* and *market orientation* of business schools. Kenney & Khanfar (2009) used terms like *customer satisfaction*, *service*

quality, switching costs, and repurchase intention when modeling their understanding of how to increase student retention rates. After all, students (or their parents) pay “good money” to be able to enroll in university courses and programs of study, ostensibly for the purpose of learning and earning a degree. In turn, the knowledge and skills they acquire are assumed to increase – if not students’ market value as future employees – at least their value as thoughtful members of society.

However, it is not just marketing educators who have embraced the student-as-customer role. In their examination of the *market orientation* of two higher-education systems, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka (2010) measured it by soliciting administrators’ views of *student orientation, competition orientation, and intra-functional orientation* (i.e., internal marketing practices). Although the academic literature includes many examples of scholars who embrace the student-as-customer perspective, a compelling case can be made for rejecting or tempering this viewpoint. Hurdle (2004), who explored marketing students’ classroom expectations, recognized: “While treating students as service customers puts the students at the center of the educational process, detractors say that short-term student satisfaction doesn’t translate into long-term knowledge and learning and that students are not analogous to customers because they don’t pay the full price of the services they are provided” (p. 4). In a comprehensive analysis of the “student-as-customer” perspective, George (2007) described it as “market overreach,” and he provided strong justification for reversing “the trend of regarding students as customers” (p. 976).

Is the Student a Customer?

It is not surprising that the “marketing perspective,” as well as its attendant focus on “customer,” might shed some light on the student-as-customer debate. The discussion here posits that in *some* cases, the student may properly be identified as a customer of higher education. However, in the all-important matter of *student engagement in learning*, a customer perspective is not instructive. Underlying this assertion is the fact that undergraduate higher education is not a single service, no more than a hotel or an airline is comprised of a single service. The services marketing literature is clear that almost any service is actually comprised of a constellation of services (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the complexity of the service), all of which can be categorized in three ways: *core services, facilitating services, and supporting services* (Gronroos, 1990). Gronroos’ and similar typologies (e.g., Lovelock, 1992) are well accepted in the services marketing literature, so this discussion focuses solely on their

application to higher education – a very complex service. Recognizing that universities can provide core services other than learning, this discussion also limits the scope of inquiry to the core service of learning.

Facilitating services in higher education are *required* because they *allow students to gain access to the core service*. Are students charged accurately for meals consumed through food services? Is the course registration process accurate and real-time? When students make appointments (e.g., advising, financial aid), do service providers meet reasonable expectations of customer service (e.g., timeliness, courtesy, empathy)? The first observation of note regarding these facilitating services is that *none* requires student engagement. Rather, they require schools to develop effective and efficient service processes that meet students' and others' expectations. The second observation is that these services have nearly identical counterparts in many other, non-academic service settings. By the time students enroll at a university, they have formed clear expectations about these types of services, and students judge their quality with a great deal of confidence. In all regards, a student is a *customer* of the myriad facilitating services that are present at nearly every step of the higher education experience.

A similar story can be told about the supporting services offered to students as part of the higher-education experience. In contrast to facilitating services, these are services that *add value* to the core service, and technically they are *not required* for students to gain access to the core service. Like facilitating services, these supporting services have counterparts in the general marketplace (e.g., hotel concierge services, physician “wellness” services, frequent-flyer lounges), so students are capable of understanding their needs and articulating expectations of service quality. As in the case of facilitating services, engagement is not essential for students to derive the full benefit of these services. It is argued here that in the case of supporting services provided by universities, a customer orientation is not only appropriate, but also necessary to create *satisfied student customers* of these value adding services.

When one considers the core service of higher education – *learning* – this core service is quite distinct from the many facilitating and supporting services students consume while enrolled. First: Students generally are incapable of “knowing what they need to know and learn” about a particular subject area. Second: The real customers of student learning include (but are not limited to) both future employers (taking a narrow view) and society as a whole (taking a broad view). Ultimately, the student is not the only or, some argue, even the primary

customer of this core service. Therefore, the marketing concept and its attendant customer focus do not comprise the proper theoretical foundation for understanding student engagement in learning. For reasons that will be addressed in greater detail below, it is suggested here that a more appropriate conceptualization of the student in the classroom is that of an *employee*. Recently, Medlin & Faulk (2011) drew parallels between employee and student engagement – using measures of employee engagement to predict student optimism – concluding that both engagement and optimism are positively related to academic performance. But, they did not offer specific insight into how to enhance student engagement, a primary goal of the remainder of this discussion.

Faculty Member as Classroom Manager

In his rather harsh critique of the student-as-customer perspective, George (2007, p. 965) argued: “Viewing the student as a customer rather than a ‘worker’ or ‘apprentice’ has created problems for higher education, including grade inflation, shortened contact hours, and the redefinition of study time.” About “the relationship between teachers and students within the college and university,” George asserted that professors may be “diminished in their professional status by being cast as facing customers” (p. 971). Although George did not specifically comment on the topic of student engagement, he did advocate for an “employer-worker” relationship between professor and student. So, if the student is best conceptualized as an employee, then perhaps a more appropriate conceptualization of the role of a professor/faculty member is that of *manager* –not producing learning to be “consumed” by the student, but rather managing the learning process. With that relationship in mind, it is then appropriate to consider how managers in a work setting enhance employee engagement and whether that knowledge can be translated to a classroom setting.

Adapting the work of Macey & Schneider (2008), Kinicki (2011) offered Figures 1 and 2 in a series of online podcasts designed to help managers understand how to “build employee engagement.” As in the case of student engagement, employee engagement has been defined in many different ways (Shuck, 2011), most frequently by HRD practitioners. Schneider, Macey, & Barbera (2009) identified a wide variety of definitions of employee engagement at the websites of major HR firms. Although no widely accepted definition of employee engagement is currently in use, Shuck & Wollard (2010) recently described it in terms very similar to those Fredricks *et al* (2004) used to categorize student engagement – “an individual employee’s

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (p. 103).

Figure 1: What Is Employee Engagement?*

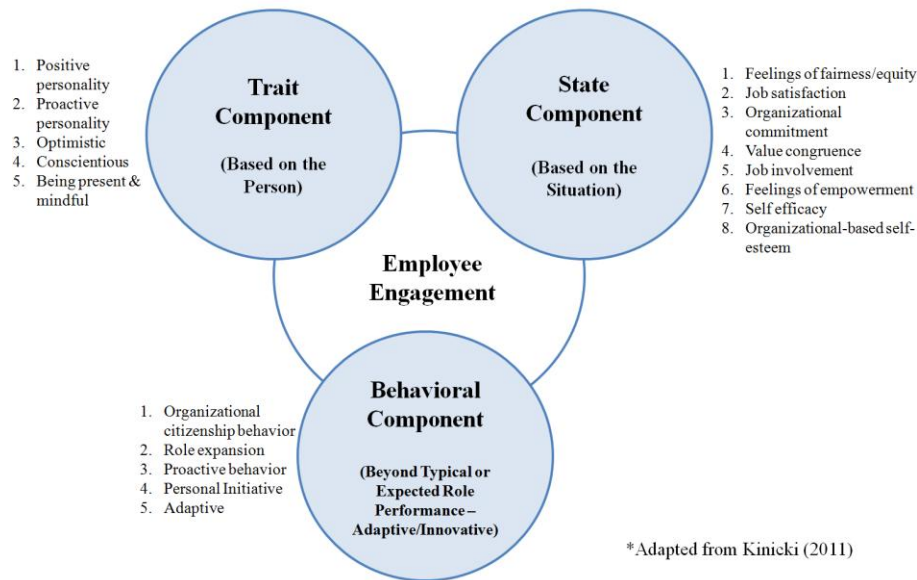


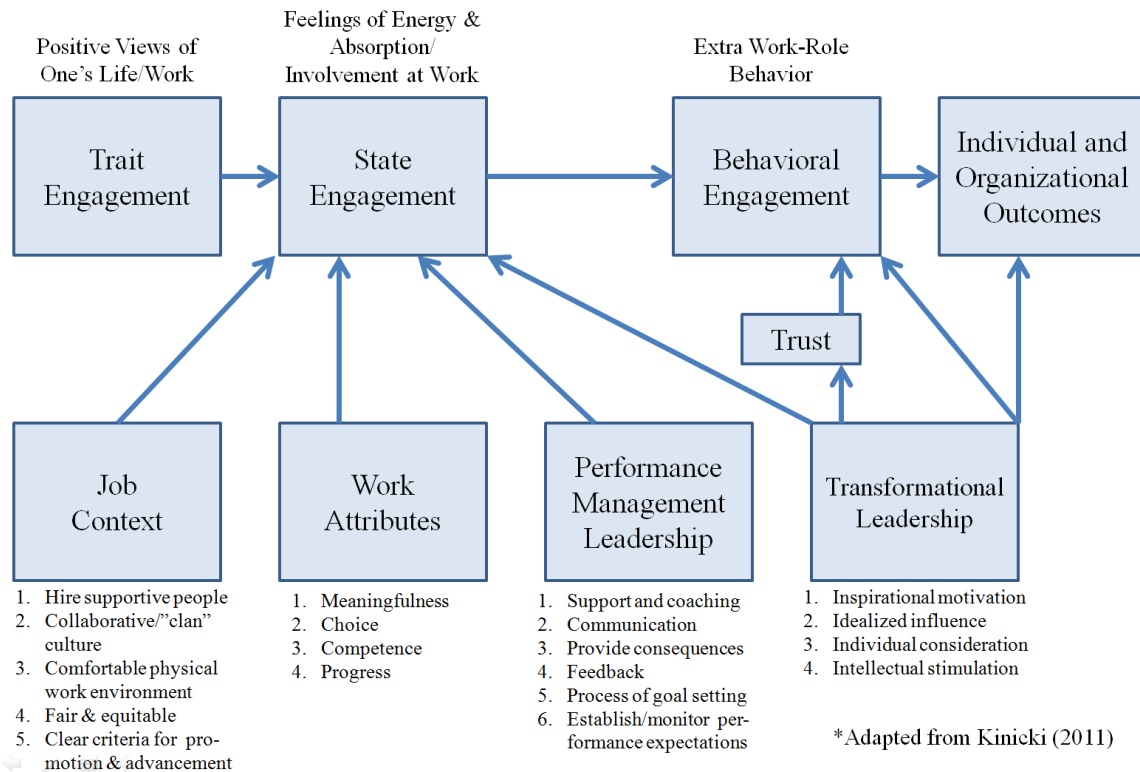
Figure 1 shows that employee engagement is comprised of *trait*, *state*, and *behavioral* components. The trait component is based on the *person*, the state component is based on the *situation*, and the behavioral component is evidenced by employee behaviors that are *beyond typical or expected role performance*. With respect to trait: Engaged employees have more positive and proactive personalities, they are more optimistic and conscientious, and they are more “present” or “mindful” in the work setting. Schreiner (2010) asserts (p. 4): “In addition to meaningful processing, engaged learning also involves a focused attention to what is happening in the moment—what psychologist Ellen Langer calls *mindfulness* Engaged learners . . . are fully in the moment; they are psychologically present in class, noticing what is new and different, able to see different perspectives on an issue.”

Kinicki (2011) asserts that managers can exert the *least* amount of influence over the trait component; rather, employees should be hired *because* of these desirable traits. In contrast, managers can exert *considerable* influence over factors comprising the state component. A manager can help develop policies and practices that affect employees’ perceptions of fairness or equity, feelings of empowerment, and job satisfaction. The model of

employee engagement depicted in Figure 1 suggests that employee engagement will produce very specific, measurable, and desirable employee behaviors (organizational citizenship behavior, role expansion, proactive behavior, personal initiative, and adaptability).

With Figure 2, Kinicki (2011) also adapted the work of Macey & Schneider (2008) to depict a *causal* relationship among factors influencing employee engagement. Macey & Schneider (2008) equate trait engagement with “positive views of one’s life and work,” state engagement with “feelings of energy, absorption,” and behavioral engagement with “extra work-role behavior” (p. 6). They acknowledge that “the challenge of establishing the conditions for state and behavioral employee engagement will be great” (p. 26). Figure 2 illustrates that it is a combination of the trait and state components of engagement, along with the influence of job context, work attributes, performance management leadership (PML) and transformational leadership (TL) that ultimately will impact employee behavioral engagement, as well as beneficial individual and organizational outcomes. Of note in Figure 2 is that managers have multiple avenues for influencing state engagement. By taking steps to create the right *job context* and *work attributes*, as well as through practicing *PML* and *TL*, managers can influence employees’ feelings of energy and absorption at work, which is reflected in their extra work-role behavior (*e.g.*, going the extra mile, proactively addressing problems, delighting customers). The trust that TL generates is not insignificant, but due to space constraints, it will not be addressed here. This discussion continues by focusing on the four constructs, which have the potential for providing the most insight for the conceptualization of professors and instructors as classroom managers and students as employees.

Figure 2: A Model of Employee Engagement*



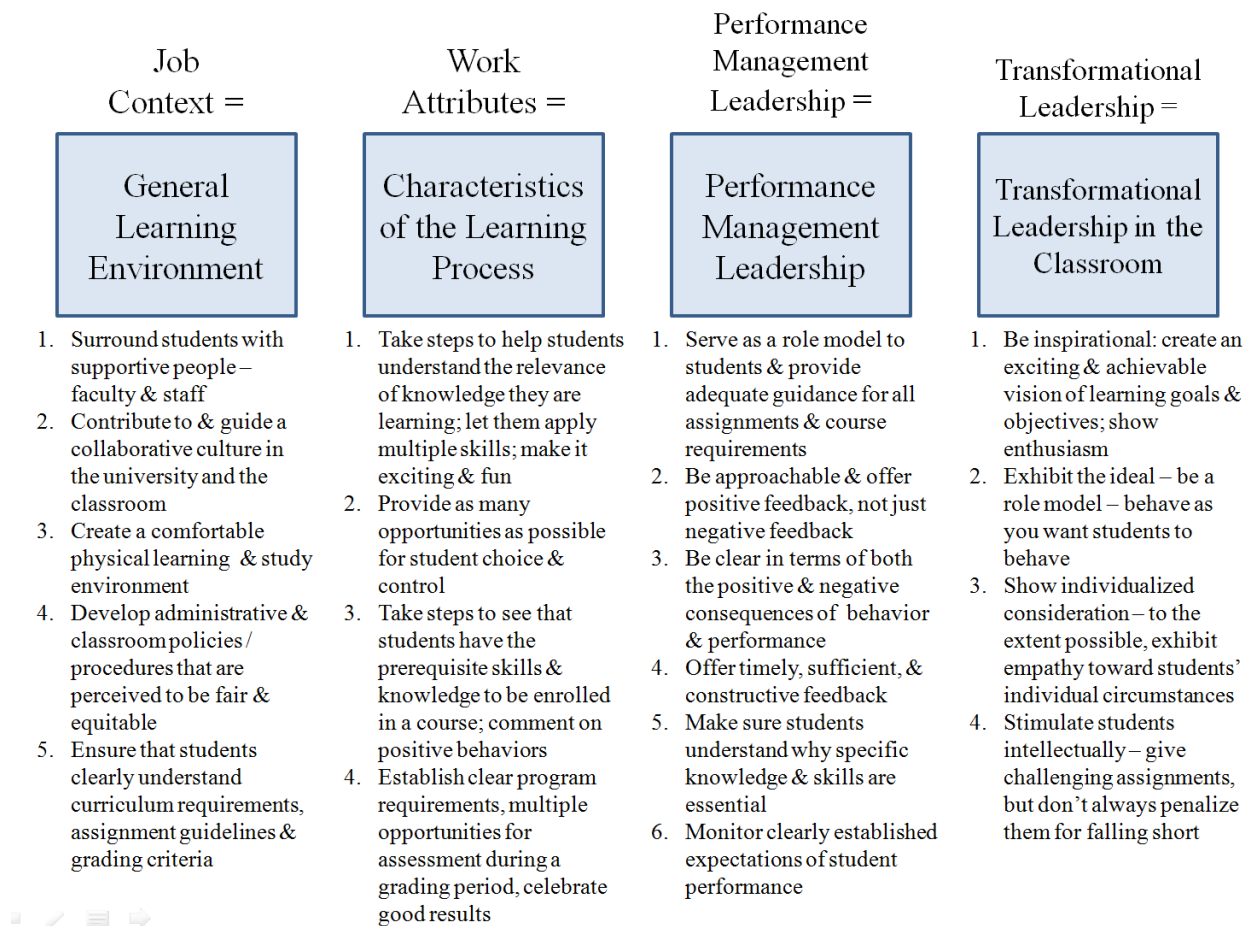
How Faculty Members Can "Build" Student Engagement

Figure 3 suggests that in a classroom setting, job context is better thought of as the *general learning environment*, and work attributes are *characteristics of the learning process*. In this setting, PML and TL would likely be very similar to the constructs in an employee/work setting, recognizing that the recipients or targets of this leadership style, as well as specific leadership behaviors, are students.

General Learning Environment. Managers who provide a job context that contributes to employee engagement 1) hire supportive people, 2) create a supportive environment, 3) provide a comfortable physical work environment, 4) engender perceptions of fairness and equity, and 5) ensure that employees understand the criteria for promotion and advancement (Kinicki, 2011 and Figure 2). Figure 3 implies there are comparable actions that professors can take to create a general learning environment that will foster student engagement in learning. For example, a

professor can ensure that grading criteria and assignment guidelines are presented clearly. Through the words and actions of faculty and staff, students can determine the extent to which the culture of the department, school, and/or university is collaborative. Professors as managers can take specific steps to promote a team environment in the classroom. Further, they can develop policies and procedures that are perceived by students to be fair and equitable. Although typically, individual faculty members cannot independently make hiring decisions or ensure a clean and comfortable physical environment in classrooms and study areas, they can advocate for and influence these factors by participating in university governance.

Figure 3: Faculty Contributions to Student Engagement in Learning



Characteristics of the Learning Process. Work attributes from the perspective of employees, include factors such as 1) the *meaningfulness* of work requirements, 2) the opportunity for employees to exert a certain amount of *choice* in their work, 3) employees' perceptions of their own *competence*, as well as whether they feel they are supported in the work they are expected to do, and 4) opportunities to identify – even celebrate – milestones, or *progress*, in their work efforts (Kinicki, 2011). Figure 3 shows that faculty members have numerous opportunities to shape the *characteristics of the learning process* to enhance student engagement. For example: Might a high level of “course repeats” in a required statistics course be due in part to the fact that faculty are not helping students understand the meaningfulness of statistics in their daily and professional lives? In his review of the book, *Teaching Statistics: A Bag of Tricks*, Cleary (2005) praises how the authors (Gelman & Nolan, 2002) recommend that statistics professors go beyond the “various penny flipping, spinning, and tipping examples” common in statistics education to present “interesting ideas about the philosophy of coin flipping, about applications at sporting events, and about the way statisticians study events straddling the fence between deterministic and random” (p. 275). Dargahi-Noubary & Growney (1998) suggest that introducing the theme of “risk” into an introductory course in probability and statistics for students “involves them in analysis of events and decision from their daily lives” (p. 44). In other words, one of the “tricks” that can be used to build student engagement in learning about probability and statistics is making the learning meaningful. Schreiner (2010) maintains (p. 7): “Thinking about how the material could be applied to personal relationships or to real-life problems can generate a deeper level of interest and meaningful processing within the student, leading to higher levels of engaged learning.”

Figure 2 shows that when employees get to make decisions about how to get the job done, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors related to enhanced employee engagement. Employers have found that flexible work schedules, job-sharing, working at home, *etc.* contribute to state engagement. In the classroom, professors may face constraints with respect to the “choice” construct, but they can strive to afford students as much choice as possible, thereby conveying a sense of control. Schreiner (2010) concludes: “Providing opportunities for students to choose ways of demonstrating their mastery of course content also enhances the likelihood of engagement, as students are encouraged to play to their strengths and apply course concepts in practical ways to their own life” (p. 6). This phenomenon appears also to relate to the interaction between student optimism and self-efficacy. Students who can exert choice are more optimistic about a successful outcome. “Optimism is closely related to the

concept of self-efficacy – a belief in how successful one can be in terms of task accomplishment” (Medlin & Faulk, 2011, p. 3).

The final element comprising the work-attributes construct of employee engagement is progress. When employees understand that their work efforts have achieved specific milestones, they are more engaged. In the case of higher education, students who achieve milestones in their academic programs should be made aware of and commended for these achievements by the university and the professor (e.g., a simple congratulatory e-mail communication). Professors can challenge students to attain certain learning objectives, and then celebrate when students achieve the desired goals.

Faculty Leadership in the Classroom. A significant implication of viewing students as employees in the classroom is that professors will be required to do much of the “heavy lifting” to achieve the goal of student engagement. It is the professor-manager who is primarily responsible for constructing the general learning environment and for developing beneficial characteristics of the learning process. Figures 2 and 3 thrust the professor into a leadership role that is pivotal to building student engagement in learning. PML is “the kind of leadership that helps employees maximize their productivity” (Kinicki, 2011). As classroom managers, faculty are obliged to set specific goals, monitor goal achievement by giving relevant feedback and coaching students, establish consequences for behavior – positive and negative – and assist students explicitly with their intellectual development. This type of leadership in a work setting relates positively to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and effort (Kinicki, 2011). Macey & Schneider (2008) conclude: “Satisfaction when assessed as satiation is not in the same conceptual space as engagement. Satisfaction when assessed as feelings of energy, enthusiasm, and similarly positive affective states becomes a facet of engagement” (p. 8). Also important: Satisfaction doesn’t lead to engagement; rather, engagement leads to satisfaction (Schneider, Macy, & Barbera, 2009).

Together, Figures 2 and 3 “ratchet up” the importance of a TL style for faculty in terms of influencing students’ learning engagement. Transformational leadership in a work setting requires managers to provide inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Figure 2 & Kinicki, 2011). Figure 3 shows how faculty members as managers can achieve this leadership style in a classroom setting. They can 1) enthusiastically create an exciting, achievable vision of learning goals and objectives, and 2) serve as role models for every desirable trait and behavior associated with engagement.

Cervone (2010) challenges educators to make learning less boring: “Students say that their class work does not connect to the ‘real world,’ or that teachers do not explain subjects in ways they can understand” (p. 37).

Contrary to the course that higher education has taken in the past two decades, faculty members – as transformational leaders – would be required to exercise judgment in dealing with individual students and their circumstances (*i.e., individual consideration*) (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). Large classes, standardized assessments, and many other developments in higher education run counter to this requirement of TL. At the same time, there are steps that faculty members can take to enhance student perceptions of empathy and individual consideration in any educational setting. They can be encouraging, supportive, and empowering. Perhaps the greatest challenge for faculty members as classroom managers is to adhere to the principle of *intellectual stimulation* in the same way this construct manifests itself in the workplace. Is it possible for professors to challenge students to “think out of the box,” but then not penalize them if it “doesn’t work out”? Can faculty members fulfill their institutional roles, as well as their responsibilities to their respective disciplines, and still practice this pivotal TL requirement? These and other relevant questions pose significant challenges for professors as transformational leaders and classroom managers. That being said, the remaining requirements of TL (*inspirational motivation* and *idealized influence*) are definitely within the control of individual faculty members as classroom managers. With respect to motivation, professors can exhibit optimism and enthusiasm, and show excitement as students move forward in their learning. With respect to idealized influence, Kinicki (2011) tells managers to “walk around and be engaged yourself.” “If you’re a ‘Sad Sack,’ complaining about the work environment, you’re not going to engage anyone.”

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

This discussion has offered some clarity regarding the issue of whether and under what circumstances students should be considered customers of higher education. It has shown that the student-as-employee perspective provides the starting point for a pedagogical framework that can be used to enhance student engagement in learning. However, this framework places much of the burden for learning engagement squarely on the shoulders of the faculty member. Even after one acknowledges the real-world challenges that are faced by faculty members, including time constraints, specific program requirements, the need to engage in a research program, and other demands placed on faculty members by academe, it is difficult to argue

against the type of actions and conditions depicted in Figure 3 as a way for “classroom managers and leaders” to help build engaged learners. Although faculty members typically have little control over the important trait characteristics of students who enroll in their class sections, managers in work settings often face the same challenge. Managers might prefer to hire employees with a “positive view of one’s life and work,” but it does not always happen that way. The framework provided here suggests that managers in general – whether they are in a work setting or in a classroom – have many ways to influence not only engagement but also the important individual and organizational outcomes depicted in Figure 2. In a higher-education setting, these outcomes would include greater knowledge attainment, a commitment to lifelong learning, loyalty to the university demonstrated through advocacy and alumni relations, and a larger contribution to society as a whole.

The next step for the ideas proposed here will be to gather data to examine empirically the concept of “student-as-employee” and “faculty-member-as-manager” in the classroom and its relationship to student engagement in learning. A close examination of course syllabi will provide insight into the general learning environment, the characteristics of the learning process, and the indicators of leadership evidenced by the elements and policies that comprise specific courses. Measures and survey instruments can then be developed to quantify student and faculty perceptions regarding the constructs posited to be under faculty members’ control (Figure 3) with respect to enhancing student engagement. This research approach may challenge the generally accepted “sanctity” of the classroom that tenured and other faculty members typically enjoy, but it may be necessary to gain greater insight into the antecedents and consequences of student engagement in learning.

References Available Upon Request