

INFLUENCING STUDENT BEHAVIOR: ENGAGEMENT AT THE OUTSET

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ABSTRACT

Brand loyalty, or in the context of higher education – student retention – is vital to the fiscal stability of most colleges and universities. The investment needed to attract and matriculate students is justified by the prospect of a four-year relationship and a potential lifelong affiliation. Thus the value associated with initial experiences or products such as orientation, first-semester courses and extracurricular programming lies in building student satisfaction. Student satisfaction with products early on leads to brand loyalty or retention in the future.

Applying marketing concepts to higher education is common. Instituting first-semester programming is also ubiquitous in higher education. Initiatives range from required courses, learning communities, extended orientation periods and supplemental academic services and extracurricular activities. A Freshman Seminar is often used to introduce students to the campus, provide academic support and instill institutional culture.

Research is needed to identify factors of such programming that lead to student satisfaction and thus a greater likelihood to student retention. It would also be beneficial to discover factors that distract students from fully engaging with the initial product offering. This paper seeks to do both by adding to the body of knowledge in servicing students as consumers of higher education. This study also extends the work of Tam (2008) on services marketing which established that marketers should familiarize customers with the service while they experience it. The application to higher education is for students to become aware of the events and services available to them while they receive academic credit to do so.

A survey of 445 undergraduate students was conducted to assess student participation and satisfaction with components of a first-semester program at a public liberal arts college in the North East. The research goal was to determine which factors lead to greater satisfaction with first-semester programming, particularly the Freshman Seminar course as well as to identify which factors detract students from fully participating in first-semester programming efforts.

Results showed that students became more engaged on campus by utilizing various services and attending various events as a result of Freshman Seminar. This is consistent with Anisimova (2007), where functional consumer benefits predict consumer loyalty for both their attitude toward the brand as well as their behaviors associated with it. Participating in the program equips students with product knowledge of the brand. This benefit functions as a tool they then use to enhance their experience by choosing campus services and events that best meet their needs.

Building a relationship with their instructor and the freshman class community also increases their satisfaction with first-semester programming. Significant outside employment (i.e., more than 20 hours per week) diminishes student participation and satisfaction. Requiring Freshman Seminar where students earn credit for developing product knowledge via visits to campus resource offices and attending campus events influenced student behavior. Investing in the customer experience with the product at the outset establishes the context for future service encounters. Thus developing initial product satisfaction lays the groundwork for future brand loyalty or customer retention.

The research provides a good understanding of the factors that lead to increased participation and satisfaction of first-semester students. This can be used by higher education administrators to incorporate particular elements in first-semester programming efforts to establish product satisfaction leading to brand loyalty or student retention.

REFERENCES

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