

## OF COURSE STUDENTS ARE CUSTOMERS!

Dennis E. Clayson, University of Northern Iowa, Department of Marketing,  
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0126, (319) 273-6015

### ABSTRACT

This paper is a satirical review of problems inherent in a customer model of education. The paper will show that counter to historical precedent, traditional pedagogical philosophy, ethical standards, and common sense, students should be seen as customers.

Ideas are important in the formulation and operation of an organization. The paradigms driving higher education are a case in point. We take for granted many of our assumptions about what a college or university does without contemplating the source of the academies' origins. Consequently, when an article appears in an influential publication (The Wall Street Journal, Tuesday, December 15, 1992) discussing a new paradigm for higher education, it is well to take note.

Dana Milbank, writing in The Journal, suggests that many schools are adopting a "controversial new brand" of education, one in which students are seen as customers of the educational process. TQM, as applied in industry, could serve as the model. This idea is sure to create opposition among more conservative faculty, especially those who have reactions to any new managerial fad that can be abbreviated into three letters. But actually, there is nothing "new" in seeing students as customers. There has simply been little public debate about the problems or merits of such a paradigm. Hints that a consumer model is already in operation can be found in matter-of-fact statements and assumptions. Dean Walter Massey at Brown University explained, for example, that the genius of the school's new curriculum is that it focuses "... on the student as the subject of concern, not areas of knowledge (p. 91)" (Sykes 1988). Or a recent article in the U.S. News & World Report that states that, "... those who pay the bills are no longer in awe of academic authority (p. 99)" (Elfin 1993), as if students actually paid for their education independent of societal costs.

The question this paper addresses is simple: Are students best served if they are seen as consumers? The marketing concept creates a strong framework for pedagogical decision making. Many faculty members embrace the idea because it absolves them of making all the decisions in the classroom. Administrators are attracted because it diffuses responsibility, and it gives them a clientele for whom they may become an

advocate. In an era of rapidly escalating tuition costs, students like to see themselves as customers because it gives them more control over their education. The concept also has social merit appealing to our sense of fair play and equality, especially in an era when difficult issues with ethical or moral overtones are increasingly being referred to majority opinion. As appealing as these arguments may be, however, there will always be those who will argue that students are not customers. Some may even suggest that it is a mistake with serious consequences to assume that they are.

Those who advocate a student customer paradigm, generally list five problems, each of which is easily dismissed.

#### 1. What is the Product?

Robert Pedersen states in The Chronicle of Higher Education, "A student cannot be a customer of higher education because, simply put, one cannot buy such an education." Of course, "one" can buy such an education. I have seen them advertised.

Since education is highly undifferentiated, with "customers" almost universally unable to selectively discriminate except by surrogate cues, education can be defined any way we wish. I will admit that marketing education does pose a special problem in definition, but nothing that cannot be overcome with a little epistemological slight-of-hand and the imposition of some arbitrary regulations. It has been stated by Shelby Hunt (1992) that marketing education occupies a position more analogous to the professions than to purely academic disciplines like sociology. While this is an apt comparison, there are some differences. A degree in marketing, especially at the bachelor level, does not make one a marketer. Unfortunately, marketing is open to anyone who can perform, irrespective of formal training. Many successful marketers do not have a degree. This should be changed. We should, as some have suggested (Bunn & Goins 1993), insist on some sort of licensing in marketing that would demand at least a marketing degree. Just because colleges and schools of business have not been able to demonstrate that having a degree in marketing significantly improves a person's performance in marketing (see Hunt, Chanko, & Wood 1986) doesn't mean that we shouldn't aggressively push forward with an excellent idea that would make the degree a true product.

## 2. Customer Demands will Reduce Academic Rigor

When making a selection, people generally try to maximize outcomes. During an operating mode, however, many people try to minimize inputs. Students, it has been argued, are no exception. The critics argue that when selecting a school or major, students will look at the programs in terms of the outputs. Those already in a program will attempt to minimize inputs. An increase in tuition may increase the perception of quality. Yet, students already in the system will protest the change in fees. Similarly, attempts to tighten academic requirements will be resisted by those in the system while many times increasing the number of applicants to the program. Students, we are told, naturally prefer less effort, less difficulty, less challenge, and less uncertainty. Many students cut classes and in general try to bargain for less than they "paid" for. There are classes in any curriculums that would be taken by very few, if any, students if it were at the students' option. True, there is some research to back up these contentions (Henke 1985; Warren 1985; Smith 1988; Varamini 1991), but other institutions must have students that don't match our high standards because surely the conditions described don't match our own experience.

## 3. Problems with Measuring Customer Satisfaction

If a student is a customer, then as in any other business, pleasing them becomes very important. An instructor's primary responsibility should be to please the students. Surveying the students (consumer research) becomes essential, and the evaluations should be taken at face value. Critics maintain that these evaluation systems have the potential of creating some serious problems not only for instructors and the institution, but also for the students themselves.

Some critics have suggested that problems with the current system have gone beyond management into issues of ideology; and with some, it appears, into a type of theology. While not emphasizing the student as a customer, the insistence of student evaluation of instruction has come primarily from the schools of education. The educational establishment has appropriately insisted that whatever happens in the classroom is the responsibility of the instructor. Questions appearing on student teacher evaluations such as, "The instructor makes me want to learn," seem to upset some faculty. This is probably due to a misunderstanding of the philosophical roots of these issues. This seemingly insulting question makes sense when one recognizes that the responsibility for learning falls totally on the instructor. For example, if a student does poorly on an exam, who is at fault? As many of

you students will tell you, either the test was faulty or the instruction was inadequate.

Critics have asked numerous questions about the effect of a customer evaluation system. Have GRE, GMAT, or any other scores improved over time as faculty have received better evaluations from students? Or have the students gotten better jobs, gotten into better graduate schools, or been happier? Does the academic rigor of the educational process diminish when students evaluate instructors like customers? Does the average GPA of schools instituting a student evaluation system go up, with a corresponding decrease in grading standards? While such questions seem to present a menacing picture, the concerns can be addressed with the following arguments: 1) In a customer model, it should be remembered that customer satisfaction is more important than the values and biases of educational suppliers. 2) Since the instructors are responsible for what happens in the classroom, increases of GPA can be seen as an indication of increased instructional excellence. 3) Besides, the faculty need these evaluation systems to maximize their performance in the classroom. Without customer evaluations coupled with administrative prodding, the faculty obviously would not perform as well as they should.

This contention is reinforced by the student customers' own perceptions. At our university, most of the students' comments are directed to administrators, not to the instructor. In other words, the students are expecting the administrators to do something about the quality of classroom instruction by doing something about the instructors. The evaluations may be used to better the performance of the faculty, but students seem to be implying that it should be the manager who would do this by motivating the worker, presumably by prodding and threats. If the faculty could be trusted in these matters, the evaluations would not need to be anonymous and they would go directly to the faculty.

If students are customers, the student evaluation process should become even more ubiquitous. Time in the classroom and instruction are only part of a student's experience with a college or university. Other aspects of the institution need to be evaluated regularly. How is the Department Head doing? The Dean? The President of the University and the Administration? What about the physical plant? Are the classrooms comfortable? The dorms? How is the food? Is the staff friendly? Since many institutions are judged by outsiders on the strength and achievements of the athletic program, do the students approve of the way the football team is managed? The current evaluation

process, although plagued with problems of reliability, is woefully under used and hypocritically aimed at only a small part of the students' total experience. The evaluation needs to be expanded to include administrators and the entire university so that everyone can benefit from the system.

#### 4. Academic Freedom and Civil Rights

If students are customers then the customer evaluation of instruction could result in a culling of faculty through denial of tenure, advancement or merit pay. Critics have maintained that this could result in a threat to traditional standards of academic freedom and civil rights. They point out research that a very consistent twenty percent of the faculty are rated as the very best and the very worst by the very same class (Follman 1984). The faculty that regularly fall into this twenty percent are probably different in some way; different in personality, teaching methods, or even in geographical or racial backgrounds. They also point out that dissatisfied customers are much more likely to be heard from than satisfied customers. They are afraid that students, when they evaluate faculty, are not likely to leave their stereotypes and prejudices behind. What is the plight, they ask, of a course of instruction or an instructor who presents controversial ideas or espouses currently unpopular opinions or ideologies? What is the fate of instructors who may be from racial, ethnic, or religious groups that the students at any given moment may find unacceptable? While these may be legitimate concerns, it is highly unlikely that student-customer evaluations would be used in this way. First, it has been my experience that the students consistently make mature, well thought out comments and suggestions and seem unswayed by the biases and prejudices of our society. Second, my impression is that administrators, unlike faculty, can be fully trusted in this matter. Even if certain "rogue" administrators would allow students demands to be used in this way, the arguments are still irrelevant. Instructor should be appropriately "attractive" to the students because, simply put, it facilitates the learning process.

#### 5. Problems with Curriculum and Faculty Resources

Although students are generally unfamiliar with the work place, they have definite ideas about what they would like to study to be successful. Most students, for example would rather study advertising than other promotions, and almost always prefer any other promotion to sales. Even though faculty may be aware that there are 100 jobs in sales for every one or two in advertising does not give that faculty member the right to dictate curriculum to a student consumer. Administrators need also to take note of student

preferences in tenure decisions and in hiring new faculty. Students, for instance, do not think that research is very important (Wilson 1982), and they most definitely prefer actual experience over degrees (Clayson 1992). Administrators should stop looking for new PhDs and begin searching for kindly but knowledgeable Fortune 500 executives who are willing to cater to the whims of twenty year olds while teaching advertising or public relations at one fifth of their current salary.

### CONCLUSION

The responsibility for education in the customer model is solely with the instructor. The student (as any other customer) should have no responsibility in the educational process other than as an evaluator or judge of what she or he purchases. Putting the educational process back in the hands of the customer not only makes marketing sense for the student and the institution, but it also makes sense politically. State legislators, educational bureaucrats and hangers-on can now get a better grip on higher education within their state. Hard data would become available to see that faculty are doing their jobs and putting forth an effort commensurate to what they are being "paid for." Critics may argue that a tax-supported or private institution is not a business with customers or products, but an organization created by the peoples of the state (or private groups) to achieve a certain purpose or goal. They would argue that if we assume that the goal is an educated and productive populace, and if we also assume that instructors are hired and paid with limited resources because the average student cannot obtain the goal without them, then to assume that students are consumers may not only be unwise but also unethical. Nonsense.

After centuries of debate about what an higher education should be, the consumer model solves the problem once and for all. The purpose of higher education is to please the customer and keep the funds flowing from the students and from the state capital.

### References

- Bunn, P. C. and L. K. Goins (1993). Certification and Recognition of Occupational Skills and Competencies: The National Retail Foundation Experience. Marketing and Education: Partners in Progress, Proceeding Atlantic Marketing Association 9th Annual Conference, 136-141.
- Clayson, D. E. (1992). PhD or Marketing Experience: What Do the Students Want? Discovering New Frontiers in Marketing Education, 1992 Western Marketing

Educators' Association Proceedings, 85.

Elfin, M. (1993). Does College Still Pay? U.S. News & World Report, October 4, 96-99

Follman, J. (1984). Pedagogue - -Paragon or Pariah-  
-20% of the Time: Implications for Teacher Merit Pay. American Psychologist, September: 1069-70.

Henke, J. W. (1985). Bringing Reality to the Introductory Marketing Student. Journal of Marketing Education, 7(Fall), 59-71.

Hunt, S. D. (1992). Marketing is... Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 20(4), 301-311.

Hunt, S. D., L. B. Chanko, and V. R. Wood (1986). Marketing Education and Marketing Success: Are They Related? Journal of Marketing Research, 8(Summer), 2-13.

Pedersen, R. (1992). The Perils of Total Quality Management: Bringing Business Rhetoric to Academe. The Chronicle of Higher Education, (Sept. 23), B4.

Smith, L. J. (1988). What They Want Vs. What They Need: The Societal Marketing Dilemma in College Curriculum. Journal of Midwest Marketing, 3(1), 50-55.

Sykes, C. J. (1988). Profscam, Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway Press.

Varamini, H. (1991). Students' Goals--Professor's Goals: Harmony or Discord? The Teaching Professor, 5(Jan.), 5-6.

Warren, D. L. (1985). Pizza, Popcorn, and the President: Moving in with the Students. Change, May-June, 29.