

STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS AND/OR PRODUCTS: DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The notion of students as customers is reported to have begun during the mid 1980's when the Total Quality Management became popular in the business world. However, there are indications that this idea was germinating for several years prior – particularly after Philip Kotler (1975) and others expanded the concept of marketing to include organizations other than for-profit businesses. By the mid-2000's articles appeared that questioned the preparedness of students entering the workforce and the concept of students as customers. Milton-Eversole and Gurchiek (2006) suggest that students are not prepared to enter the workforce ready to make a positive contribution. With state legislatures questioning and decreasing their financial support of higher education, universities are having to justify the claim that a university education produces a qualified work force. Svensson (1998) opined that if universities are not producing "qualified workers," employers will look elsewhere or take steps to create their own training programs or even "corporate universities." The rise of "for profit" and/or online universities is also challenging traditional universities to justify the value of their education.

With a customer focus, universities want to attract and retain students, create student satisfaction with the university experience, and provide customer benefits. Turner (1978) provided a customer focus in his article when proposing an entire 18 month marketing plan to recruit students, beginning with identifying prospective students and ending with matriculation and follow-up.

In contrast, taking the view that universities are in the business of the creation and transmission of knowledge for preparing students for the future (Bermudez 2010) and that students "do not know" what they do not know, faculty must maintain responsibility for what is taught (Svensson 2007). Svensson cites Peter Drucker who warned that colleges and universities would not survive if they did not respond to market forces. This view of the marketplace is more in line with a view of students as products of the university and the organizations

that hire students as the customer. With this perspective the university recruits students capable of succeeding and challenges those students to develop the knowledge and skills that the hiring organizations require.

Each of these perspectives (students as customers or students as products) has different implications for developing curriculum, relationships with students, and relationships with employer organizations. There are several dimensions of divergence depending upon which perspective is taken. The perspective will impact how instruction is delivered and how other student service departments will focus their efforts. When students are perceived as the primary customers, the colleges will take many measures to assure that student expectations are met and, in some cases, the colleges can "surprise and delight" the students by offering them unique experiences. The focus on student retention leads colleges to create ways in which students feel a strong identity with the University, from logo apparel and accessories to mentor relationships (with faculty or other students). These efforts create customer loyalty to the institution, which results in higher levels of satisfaction – and ultimately, loyalty and support as alumni of the institution.

In contrast to this perspective, if students are the products, the emphasis is more on building relationships with employers and financial supporters of the institution. Creating opportunities for these customers to feel identity with the institution is the goal of many campaigns. In promotion, the college may use slogans such "This is your community's institution" "We are here for you." etc. The college may also recognize companies and supporters through a variety of "special invitation events" where businesses and individuals can meet with outstanding students and faculty. Key customers may also be given information on the colleges' graduates that best fit their needs and requirements.

References available on request