

## **Customer Service:**

The term “customer service” provides institutions of higher education with a relatively new challenge in dealing with present day college students. Alumni, businesses, government officials, donors, community members and leaders have traditionally been the parties offered excellent customer service by colleges and universities, while students have been considered more as products of the university (Net Results, 2000?). However, an ever increasing body of students who differ in race, ethnicity, age, reason for pursuing a degree, and socioeconomic status are attending college with the expectation that they be treated as a valued customer rather than merely a student taking classes. Should colleges change their organizational structures and student philosophy to meet the customer service needs of students? Are students really stakeholders in institutions of higher education before they become alumni? How far should institutions of higher education, if at all, go to ensure that students are satisfied with their college experience? This week we will explore the aforementioned questions by examining the factors contributing to the changing landscape of higher education, by presenting some of the major customer service complaints that students voice, and finally by offering some practices institutions of higher learning can adopt to improve student customer satisfaction.

### **Factors Contributing to Changes in Student Populations**

The access of higher education to the general population is a relatively new phenomenon. The GI Bill of 1944, the civil rights movement and integration of Predominantly White Institutions, the sheer amount of institutions of higher education, and a current economic recession have contributed to a dramatic change in the type of

student population that attended college sixty years ago. Before the GI Bill of 1944 attending college was something meant for the educational elite and for young adults whose families had a history of attending college (Rudolph, 1962). Economic recession and the end of World War II created a problem where many soldiers returned from the War without employment opportunities. In order to solve this problem, the GI Bill was created so that military men could attend college to improve their chances for employment. Instead of institution of higher education catering to the elite of the United States, the doors opened for a variety of individuals from varying socioeconomic and family backgrounds.

The Civil Rights Movement and the resulting integration of schools also contributed to a population change in many colleges and universities. Before the 1960s and 1970s, White students attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) and African American and Black students attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). The integration of PWI's and some HBCU's has created a new dynamic in which professors and administrators must work to create an institutional climate that is welcoming to all student regardless of their race. In addition, all vested parties in higher education (students, staff, faculty) now interact on some level, whether it is merely seeing or actually communicating, with people from varying backgrounds.

Other factors that have contributed to the changing climate of higher education are the present day economic recession in the United States which could lead to an increase in attendance, the market of higher education being flooded with four year, two year, and technical institutions and with students who are attending part-time and full-time. Students now have an inordinate amount of choices in terms of choosing a college

or university, and the institutions that best meet the customer service needs of the students will appeal more to prospective students. Additionally, with the majority of students attending college being nontraditional age (older than 18-22), the institutions that best market to a variety of populations are the ones that are succeeding.

A final factor contributing to the changes in the higher education landscape are the changing expectations of students. Daviess (2002) presents six expectations that students have of higher education that are relatively new. One, students expect that the delivery of education to them be flexible and it should follow what they desire. Specifically, students want to be able to attend classes when it is convenient for them. Two, the students attending college today attend with the expectation that the technology the institution uses is cutting edge. Students want to walk into a classroom where the lecture is delivered via a laptop attached to a projector, and the classroom should have the ability for them to hook up their own computers to take notes or access the Internet. Three, students believe that the communication between themselves and their institution should occur equally from both parties. Administrators and offices sending letters to students regarding their education as the only form of communication is no longer acceptable to them. They want to be able to communicate with someone on the phone, in person, or via email whenever they have an issue. Four, they students of today expect to be consulted about the learning process. For example, students want to be able to help set the curriculum that they have to take to graduate, and they desire some voice in the decision on how they are evaluated. Five, students express that they need accurate information regarding their courses, assessment, scheduling, and graduation. These students expect to travel to one office to register, schedule, drop classes, add classes, pay

bills, and conduct other university business. They expect one stop shopping rather than having to travel to four or five buildings to conduct one item of business. Finally, students want administrators to be strait-forward and honest when providing answers to problems. Student would much rather hear the truth, even if it is not what they want to hear, rather than some politically correct packaged answer.

In this section we have attempted to provide the major factors that have contributed to a student population that desires to be treated like a customer rather than a product of higher education. The GI Bill of 1944 and the Civil Rights Movement have opened to doors of higher education to most people in the United States rather than a select few. The amount of institutions available to students is inordinate and because of that they have to compete for students. Couple the competition for students with the new customer service expectations of students and a new climate has been created in which being student customer service oriented has become an option to ponder. The next section will discuss some specific issues that have been identified by researchers, and then a discussion regarding how to improve customer service will follow.

### **Presentation of Issues**

Noel/Levitz Centers identified some problems that students encounter when attempting to navigate through the college process. It begins during the admissions process. Many students are unable to reach someone on the phone in the admissions office and if they leave a message it generally is not returned in a timely fashion. If a student is attempting to transfer into an institution, then an even more complicated application process is sometimes created revolving around the acceptance or denial of transfer credit. An issue related to the admission process but that can be expanded to the

entire application process is that universities generally do a poor job educating parents and students about how to navigate through the administrative system. This makes it very difficult for students to apply for admittance,, register for classes, sign up for housing, and complete all of the other necessary paperwork to ensure that they are in administrative good standing. Poor technology and website management provides an additional problem that parents and students face during the application and registration process. Many colleges and universities have websites that are not user friendly, and many universities and colleges fail to have the processes students desire to have online (housing registration, course signup, etc.) actually available on the internet to the extent the students desire.

Once parents and student arrive on campus there are many times new challenges that arise. First, many offices and divisions on campus fail to communicate well. For instance, students may ask the admissions office how to apply for financial aid and the admission office staff may be unaware of the financial aid timelines or processes. Parents and students expect everyone who represents the institution to be able to answer questions they believe should be common knowledge. A second problem students and parents encounter once arriving to campus, related to the first, is that they experience the “run around.” Specifically, a student may have go to one office to sign up for something, but be told that he/she has to go to another office to have a form signed proving that he/she is a student. When that student goes say to the registrar he may be told that she has to have her letter from the admission office in order to confirm her identity. In short, a student may have to travel to several different offices before being able to complete a relatively simple task. A third problem students face once they are on campus is that

many offices may not be open during the hours students can actually access them. For instance, if a student attending college part-time can only travel to campus at night because of work, then if the advising office close at 5pm it will be very difficult for that student to talk to an advisor. Colleges must ask if it is reasonable to stay open from 8a-5pm instead of say 10am-7pm. Finally, if a student happens to mention to someone all of the administrative challenges she/he faced while initiating the college process, many institutions continue to make the same mistakes due to poor communication and the failure to see the student as the customer.

Smith (1995) identified some very similar challenges that students and parents encounter during the entire college process. He iterated that students have problems with parking, having to cut unnecessary red tape, experience rudeness from university employees, receive improper information, and they have to wait in line only to be told they are in the wrong place because of improper information. In addition, Smith (1995) indicated that at some institutions student workers may not receive a paycheck from their on campus job or their paycheck may be late. Other voiced problems of students are classes that are too large, professors that show up late to class or do not show up at all, too many students in not enough space, buildings that are outdated, websites that are not user friendly, and it seems that in every office the person is always new because of the rapid turnover of student services professionals.

It is obvious from the literature on this topic that the expectations students and parents express regarding their higher education experience is not matching up with what actually occurs. Students and parents expect a user-friendly process during the application and general college experience process, but what they receive is often

unnecessary bureaucratic red tape, unfriendliness, misinformation, and an overall frustrating administrative experience. Is this a problem that student services administrators should work to remedy? If so, how far should colleges go to become customer service oriented? These questions will be explored in the next section.

### **Solutions and Change**

Ten or twenty years ago it may have been appropriate to ignore some of the customer service complaints that parents and students had with the justification that it is their choice to attend college and they should adapt to the institutional rules and procedures. Perhaps, some institutions of higher education can still afford to ignore the customer service expectations of the students because the institutional reputation will speak for itself when recruiting and retaining students. However, most institutions offering a form of higher education must change if they expect to survive. Zemsky and Massy in a 1995 article in *Change* stated “to survive and prosper in an age of enterprise colleges and universities will have to be more responsive to the changing market for research and learning, more willing to make service their marks of quality, and more successful in differentiating among separate functions like teaching and research (40-49).” A quote from the *Net Results* section of the NASPA website reads: “We no longer are operating in an environment where students have limited choices about where to attend school. There are presently more openings than there are students.” Finally, Tony Tricker, who is involved in higher education in England, says, “the student experience has become an important dimension in the measurement of quality in education (1).” Based on the above thoughts, it becomes fairly obvious that the need for quality customer service in higher education is not only a legitimate one but possibly a necessity for

survival for some institutions of higher education. Therefore, three suggestions for how colleges can provide quality customer service will be offered below.

The first example offered here derives from a purely business approach to customer service relations. Ron Willingham offers six steps to improving customer service in his book “blah blah blah.” First, he states that it is important to “greet customers” when they walk through your door because that makes a great first impression. For the purposes of higher education, it means that offices should actively speak to students and parents and offer help immediately after they walk through the office door. Even if the student is in the wrong place and even if they are upset about that, the employee can minimize that student’s frustrations simply by greeting them with a smile. Second, he states that businesses should “value customers.” Specifically, he proposes that all customers should be treated like they are important and the person working in the store or office should ask the customer questions and genuinely be interested in the needs of the customer. Again, even if the student is in the wrong place or the student does not receive what he/she came for, then at the very least that student feels valued by the office and hopefully that makes he/she feel valued by the institution. Third and fourth, businesses and offices should “ask how to help the customer” and really “listen to your customer.” It is easy to ask how to help someone, but it is difficult to really listen to what the person says sometimes. It is essential for offices within student services to actively attempt to decipher what a student actually needs. The fifth suggestion is to actually “help customers.” Mr. Willingham says that people are purchasing goods or asking for a service because of what it will bring them. He suggests that the people interacting with customers should view the relationship more as a

partnership than a transaction. In terms of what this means to customer service in student services it means that after identifying what a student needs, every attempt should be made to meet that need. If the student has come to the admissions office to pay their bursar bill in error, then the people at the admission office should either politely point the student in the right direction or perhaps even escort the student to the bursar's office. Finally, it is important to "invite the customer back." After they either receive the service they need or are pointed in the correct direction, then that student should be invited to come back anytime they need help. In short, regardless of whether or not an office can actually provide the service a student needs, the student should have a positive experience if the people in the office greet the student, value the student, ask the student how the office can help, listen to the response of the student, actually help the student, and invite the student back to the office.

A second way in which colleges can offer excellent customer service is to create "smart" websites. Greg Gianforte, who works with E-service for Academics, wrote an executive summary on the type "smart" website that his company can build for institutions of higher education. The premise behind their idea is that the Internet provides a vehicle to improve the quality of service students receive on and off campus. His research indicates that 83% of 15-17 year old high school students use the Internet to research their college options. Furthermore, he states that most parents and prospective college students are at work or in school during normal 8am-5pm office hours for colleges and universities, and a website that can offer parents and prospective students needed information after 5pm will allow for quality customer service without the extension of office hours.

What e-Services does is allow the visitors to the website to actually build the site. The “intelligent” websites they build tracks the areas of the site visited most frequently as well as the questions asked via email to create a website that has the most requested information in highly visible locations. This company states that over 96% of all visitors to websites they build find the answers they are looking for without intervention from any administrative staff. This means that the customers receive quality customer service whenever they want it and many times without having to wait for needed answers. The University of South Florida (<http://www.usf.edu/>), the University of Texas ([www.utexas.edu](http://www.utexas.edu)), and Walden University ([www.waldenu.edu](http://www.waldenu.edu)) all have created these “smart” websites and they are satisfied with the results. It is reasonable to assume that the Internet is a significant mechanism to achieve high quality customer service that is relatively cost effective. Creating “intelligent” or “smart” websites most definitely provides a viable option to improving customer service in higher education.

Finally, improving customer service on a college campus could require that the entire campus shift their focus to become a superior customer service provider. The best example of actually implementing this type of approach is the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) approach. In the early 1990s EMU was experiencing many issues regarding customer service. In response they created the Constituent Services Committee in 1994. The committee’s mission was to ensure that quality customer service was emphasized across the university by asking all divisions and departments to collaborate on how to develop strategies to improve customer service. The committee was comprised of representative from every academic and non-academic division of the university. The goals of the committee, that still presently govern the committee, are to

develop recommendations for divisional and department quality customer service standards, to design and implement strategies to assess user satisfaction with services provided by departments based on established service standards, to review current methods of communicating with dissatisfied constituents and determine effective approaches for resolution, to offer customer service training workshops for university staff and student employees, to review and evaluate divisional and departmental goals and policies to ensure that quality customer service is incorporated, and to collaborate across the university to develop awareness initiatives. Some positive outcomes of this initiative were the creation of a “Customer Service Awareness Week,” the creation of a student employee handbook and supervisors guide for customer service, they added customer service related questions to the interview process employees experience before working for the university, they developed customer service workshops, implemented a mystery shopper program, and created motivators and rewards for excellent customer service practices. The type of customer service that students at EMU receive has improved immensely since the early 1990s and this continued success is due directly to the fact that quality customer service has become an institutional value. Granted, this is an example from a large university but the principles they used are application to technical colleges as well.

In this section three promising ideas have been offered on how to improve customer service on college campuses. It is important to adopt the customer service attitudes of the business world in order to create offices where students are treated like they matter, it is essential that institutions of higher education created “intelligent” websites that adequately assist website visitors, and it is imperative that customer service

become and institutional value rather than a phrase that is thrown around and then forgotten. Adopting part or all of these approaches may not solve help colleges and universities meet all of the expectations that students and parents have, but adopting the practices will surely help meet most student and parent customer service expectations.

### **Conclusions**

This lecture began with the presentation of how the expectations that students and parents have of institutions of higher education in terms of customer service were not in concert with what was actually being provided by institutions of higher education. It would be easy and perhaps justified for colleges and universities to balk at the call for increased quality customer service because attending an institution of higher education is in fact a privilege rather than a right. However, in a time where there are a plethora of college options for students, it is of the utmost importance for institutions of higher education to make a positive impression on prospective students so that they will consider the institution and on current students so that they will continue their educational experience at a given institution. The best way to make this positive impression is via quality customer service. There may have been a time when students were not the customer, but now treating students like customers may be more a matter of survival for a college or university than an option.