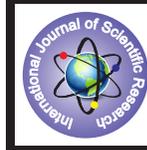


Is a Student a Customer or Creator?



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ABSTRACT

We live in a consumer society, so it is hardly surprising that even universities, or rather higher education has begun to be perceived in terms of commodities. In this brave new academic world, in which a sort of commercialized new term has been created, every individual is called a revenue centre, every group of people is a stakeholder, every student is a customer, every professor is an entrepreneur, and every institution is seen as a seeker of profit – whether in the form of money or in the form of human capital. Thirty years ago the connection between business and higher education was seen as a necessary evil. In the current scenario, in spite of the voices of protest against the introduction of managerialism to the running of higher education institutions and increased cooperation between the business sector and universities, the commercialization of higher education is a fact. The students who think they are customers of their universities, feel like they are being owed something as a student and don't think of themselves as being "creator" of knowledge and education. A student who holds "Student As a Customer" perceptions is also likely to hold attitudes and engage in behaviors that are not conducive to success as a student. So, universities may find it useful to inform their student 'customers' that they must create their desired educational outcomes with the support of teachers. Universities could emphasize students' accountability for helping create knowledge and meeting learning expectations. Thus, the society could benefit by specifically defining the student's role as a "creating" customer rather than as a passive recipient of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a consumer society, so it is hardly surprising that even universities, or rather higher education has begun to be perceived in terms of commodities. In this brave new academic world, in which a sort of commercialized new term has been created, every individual is called a revenue centre, every group of people is a stakeholder, every student is a customer, every professor is an entrepreneur, and every institution is seen as a seeker of profit – whether in the form of money or in the form of human capital. With the aim of gaining new students (customers?), universities spend huge amount on promotion, and the university itself needs to become a brand. Thirty years ago the connection between business and higher education was seen as a necessary evil. In the current scenario, in spite of the voices of protest against the introduction of managerialism to the running of higher education institutions and increased cooperation between the business sector and universities, the commercialization of higher education is a fact. Clearly there is a need for a middle ground in the discussion about customer service as it relates to students in higher education. But at the same time, in order to compete with the rising standards of education, it has become essential for educational institutes to provide students with opportunities and activities to involve in creative thinking. Most colleges and universities have developed their curriculum to focus on thinking approaches and creative development. A thorough structure for creative thinking and development is still very far, to meet with the requirements of the new century. In this article, an attempt has been made to find out the role of student- a customer or creator?

STUDENT IS A CONSUMER: SAYS THE LAW

As per The Consumer Protection Act 1986, the student is a consumer of service of educational institute- Sushant Yuvaraj Rode v; Shri Ramdeobaba Engineering College, 1993 (III) CPR 624.

1. There was a time when educational institutions put forth the argument that since students are part of their institutions, they cannot be termed as consumers. This they did to wriggle out of the Consumer Protection Act.
2. A student is a consumer when he pays a fee and other charges for services received at an education institution. Therefore education institutions are indeed service providers under the circumstances.
3. Coming to the question of the relationship between the institute and the student, education institutes have their own terms and conditions, their own system and style of management, of which a student is never a part. Students are bound by their rules and not the part of the management or decision-making.

There is no contract between the school and the students of a service provider and a service buyer. Therefore students are consumers under the Consumer Protection Act 1986.

STUDENT AS A CUSTOMER

In many aspects the students are customers. They are customers because they have a binding contract for goods and services, and also for the possibility of studying in an organization which, operating like a business, sells the opportunity to study. According to the contract, students have the chance to express their needs, expectations and satisfaction in connection with the university environment, and their voices should be heard.

Principles for customer service to students:

1. The success of the institution is dependent upon providing high-quality service to students. Students affect the bottom line.
2. Employees need to be reminded that every single one of them, regardless of their level of interaction with students, is in the business of serving students. Everything is woven together in the institution, and students deserve to receive assistance to meet their legitimate needs.
3. When it comes to experiencing service satisfaction, perception is reality in the minds of every student. It is important to understand the student in order to deliver service in a manner that is perceived to be satisfying to the student.
4. Each student is unique, thus it is important to understand the unique qualities of each student in order to provide service that meets their individual needs.
5. Employees should follow a variation of the Golden Rule by treating students the way that they would want their son or daughter to be treated.
6. It is hard to recover from a mistake, so when it comes to service to students every effort should be made to do it right the first time.
7. There is a need to solicit feedback from students at all times and then listen, especially when it hurts.
8. Treat students with dignity and respect. This is a basic human necessity and right.
9. Give students clear directions on how to solve their problems and issues. Students should not be given the run-around. Students are at college to study and learn, not go on a wild goose chase all over campus trying to find the answers to simple questions.
10. Be responsive to students and their parents. "If you tell a parent you will call them back today, then call them back today". Being true to your word means a lot to students and their families.
11. Give timely answers to students' questions and regular feedback on their progress.

WHY A STUDENT IS NOT A CUSTOMER?

In higher education, we should be ever mindful of, and responsive to, the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the student. However, this does not mean we should think of the student as a "customer" in the conventional sense assumed by a profit-oriented business. "Customer" is just a word, of course, and one could argue that using it does no harm. But we should beware of the possible confusion that the word "customer" introduces, for these reasons:

1. Education is clearly a service, not a product, and therefore the heavily units-of-product mode of thinking characteristic of business may not hold in a service endeavor. Many businesses, of course, are learning these difficult lessons as well as higher education.
 2. Businesses compete for "customers." While any college or university certainly hopes to attract the best students, to "compete for customers" may lead schools into inflated and misleading claims that have little to do with what will actually be required of the student to get a good education.
 3. The student's active, continual participation in the educational process is required for it to have the value the student wants it to have. Many businesses, on the other hand, actually minimize the amount of work the customer is going to have to do to realize the product or service's benefits.
 4. The student is not the same person from "transaction" to "transaction," but is instead growing, changing, becoming more discriminating and sophisticated. The conventional customer's needs and expectations are often assumed to be more constant.
 5. The provider--the professor--is also growing and changing and becoming more discriminating, and so cannot be expected to regard the student in a fixed and unchanging way. On the other hand, once the conventional business has "figured out the customer," that view is practiced as long as possible. The conventional business does not want a lot of unplanned growth and change in either provider or receiver.
 6. The honest educator wants a lot of growth and change in the student and in the professor-provider. The honest educator knows that an assumption that students and professors never change is demeaning and inconsistent with the goals of education.
 7. The value of education often has long-delayed manifestations. Frequently an educational experience dramatically improves in perceived value as time goes on. It is not expected by a business that customers might initially be neutral or even negative about the product/service, but change their mind over time.
 8. Students are more and more being asked to learn in teams and engage in mutual learning with each other and with faculty. Business knows that customers communicate with each other, but except in rare instances does not depend for the value of its products and service on such communication.
 9. Students go through a rather rigorous qualifying process to participate in the educational activity. Business tends to minimize the prior qualifications and experience it demands of customers before they can partake of its products and services.
 10. Furthermore, "being a student" is always a complex multi-year learning process. One's initial attempts may be very unsatisfying to everyone. Business does not assume that "customership" is a complex learning process, although for some products and services it clearly is.
1. The delivery of education is a complex interaction of multiple systems that include students, professors, physical facilities, world events, time, and very complex social relationships. There is nothing neat about it. The conventional view of the customer is that such a complex set of systemic relationships should be minimized and streamlined as much as possible. Business does not want customer relations to be inefficient.
 2. Many, if not most, students are funded by third-party payers: parents, employers, foundations, government. A per-

son funded by a third party is a quite different kind of recipient than a conventional customer who directly feels the cost of the product or service he/she is buying.

3. Most businesses have one class of stakeholders they call "customers." By definition of a university, all of its stakeholders are "customers," in the sense that its conscious mission is to benefit everyone associated with it, including unborn generations. This is such a different meaning of "customer" that I think the word is not appropriate at all.

STUDENT IS A CREATOR

If we look at the term 'Student' it has specific connotations. Notice University students are not called pupils. The etymology of the word comes from the latin 'studere' which means to direct ones zeal at something. Notice there is no reference to being spoon fed and taught as a pupil might be. Students are provided with a 'field of study' into which they must immerse themselves taking responsibility for engaging with the subject. If they are involved in the construction of knowledge, are not customers but creators. Learning(creating) is a direct consequence of students' efforts, more rarely is it a purchased service. Universities that implement customer-service initiatives may attract students only to find that those students are not inclined to work hard. Universities may find it useful to inform their student 'customers' that they must create their desired educational outcomes with the support of teachers. Universities could emphasize students' accountability for helping create knowledge and meeting learning expectations. The students who are happy in the college environment are those who are strongly involved with the student's modern role – Creator. For all of their new facilities and extracurricular programs, college still satisfies those 'customers' who are engaged in creating.

CONCLUSION

This is a hot topic in higher education. It is a misguided and mischievous metaphor. Using the term 'customer' for everyone from patients, passengers, to pupils has a managerial genealogy. It is to some extent a helpful metaphor in helping universities think about the service they deliver, and it should also be connected with 'customers' thinking about their responsibilities too. The students who think they are customers of their universities, feel like they are being owed something as a student and don't think of themselves as being "creator" of knowledge and education. A student who holds "Student As a Customer" perceptions is also likely to hold attitudes and engage in behaviors that are not conducive to success as a student. Students who perceive themselves as customers of the university are more likely to complain and to feel entitled to receiving positive outcomes from the university; they are not, however, any more likely to be involved in their education. So, universities may find it useful to inform their student 'customers' that they must create their desired educational outcomes with the support of teachers. Universities could emphasize students' accountability for helping create knowledge and meeting learning expectations. The society could benefit by specifically defining the student's role as a "creating" customer rather than as a passive recipient of knowledge.

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