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Students as customers

by Craig Swenson

Most professors cringe at the idea that college students should be treated as consumers and their education as a product, but the changing of society and the economy demands that colleges prepare a significant proportion of the population as a new work force.

Most academic conferences these days include a paper in which the presenter calls on higher education to "respond to the needs of the market" and to "treat students as customers." As you listen, you can sense the hair rising on the backs of professorial necks.

During the coffee break following one such presentation, I overheard two professors conducting a postmortem. To view students as customers, one argued, leads inevitably to pandering. Students don't know what they don't know. That's the teacher's job-to guide them. All this talk about being responsive to the market, the other suggested, is about economics pure and simple. It has little to do with education. "The market," he said, paraphrasing Charles Dickens' famous observation about the law, "is an ass."

It was, frankly, a troubling conversation – one I've thought about many times since. I don't lack some sympathy for the views of these colleagues. A nostalgic part of me wants the campus to be a cloistered walk, a retreat from the market's incessant clamor. Students should come as intent on preparing to make a life as they are to make a living. Corporations should value as "skilled" employees who have drunk deeply from the well of knowledge and have learned to think broadly and critically.

I'm also a realist. Upwards of half our college and university students are now of the age group we used to refer to as nontraditional – of those, four out of five work full-time. Most will tell you they returned to college to better their economic lot in life. It's difficult to argue that these students shouldn't be viewed as intelligent consumers of higher education, even though doing so appeals to traditional, sometimes paternalistic views of the student-faculty relationship.

As adults, they return to school because they choose to, not to satisfy some coming-of-age ritual. Presumably, their greater life experience makes them abler to participate in determining their own educational needs. They've earned that right by virtue of being grown-up.

At a different level, a profound social transformation has accompanied our shift from a manufacturing to an information economy. If society has changed, it seems naive to expect that its institutions wouldn't adapt and evolve as well. It seems clear, for example, that our economic future requires a work force whose members have skills that are in many ways quite different from their predecessors.

"Knowledge" workers must be at once technically skilled and broadly educated. If knowledge doubles every seven years, it no longer seems possible for a person to learn the "body of knowledge" of a discipline. Rather, students will need increasingly to understand the foundation of a subject as well as how to access and use new knowledge as it comes available. Should we be surprised to find, then, that preparing adults who already have many of these skills will require us to change some of our own traditional practices?

For some in traditional higher education, however, preparing students for careers in this new economy seems inevitably a less worthy undertaking than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. They divide the world of learning into "education"

and "training" and speak condescendingly of the latter. But, in fact, given the economic transformations of the knowledge age, the line between the two is rapidly disappearing. More and more, the skills we "train" people for are intellectual, not physical; they require the exercise of higher-order cognitive abilities that mark the "educated" person. It is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that training and education are different activities, much less mutually exclusive.

Employers in all types of organizations increasingly lament that our education system isn't producing graduates prepared to fill the kinds of jobs created by a new economy. We can decry the vocationalism of students or institutions, but in taking that argument too far we demonstrate an ignorance of important realities. The cultural and economic milieu in which American colleges and universities arose in the 18th and l9th centuries was far different from today's. We're no longer educating genteel elites; our mandate now is to educate a significant portion of our population, not only for life but to make a living, too.

If qualified workers aren't coming from our colleges and universities, employers will look elsewhere or take steps to prepare them on their own. The rise of the "corporate university" is a shot across the bow of higher education; so is the rise of for-profit postsecondary providers. All of these alternatives arose for a reason and will prove healthy for the nation. Absent them, our system of higher education risks becoming an irrelevant anachronism. In *The Monster Under the Bed*, Stan Davis and Jim Botkin (1994) describe how this is so:

> *In our economic system, we believe that competition is good because it keeps the players active in their search for new and better ways to provide goods and services. When success leads to an overwhelming market share, however, a culture emerges that is arrogant, self-satisfied, inward-looking, and unaware of threatening change. The same is true with regard to competition among sectors of society for predominance in education. When church and state were competitors, each had to demonstrate its greater ability to meet society's needs. But now that the state has a virtual monopoly, it has become less responsive to those needs. Had it been subject to the rigors of competition and the demands of the marketplace, it might have retained its social and economic relevance.*

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Like it or not, our economy and the businesses that compose it are, like our students, the customers of higher education. If higher education refuses this mantle, we shouldn't be surprised when new providers emerge. They will look different from what we're used to, and will be ever-so-eager to fill in for those who seem unwilling or unable to meet the needs of their constituents. It's a case from Economics 101: in periods of shortage, alternatives arise to satisfy demand. It's called a market. Whatever the wish for idyllic yesterdays, markets exist and tend to have their way. The demographic and social forces that drive these changes will be greater than those that combine against them.

A further force for change is raised today by advances in communications technology. The ability to be electronically present erases traditional barriers of time, space, and place. It also has made it less difficult to reach – and compete for – markets. Millions of people whose access to higher education has been limited now enjoy an increasing number of educational options, thanks to technology.

According to Utah Governor Michael Leavitt, a driving force behind the creation of the Western Governors University, the result of these trends will be an educational "common market" whose emergence will undermine the monopoly enjoyed by traditional higher education. Providers who meet market needs most efficiently and effectively will be preferred over those who do not.

Peter Drucker warns that the failure of traditional colleges and universities to respond to market forces will result in their demise. He sees little likelihood of their overcoming the structural inertia that grips them.

Students as customers as students

Symbolic of this inertia is the reluctance of many in higher education to view students, their families, and employers as customers. Perhaps this is because, until fairly recently, they never had to: higher education's resource base tended to increase annually anyway, from relatively stable sources within protected markets.

Ironically, a customer orientation is something today's innovators don't shy away from. The price they pay is often condescension from ivy-covered towers. But it is the very behavior that will guarantee the survival of these new entrants.

The aversion felt by some educators to treating stakeholders as customers stems in part from a flawed understanding of the word itself. Academicians with little or no actual business experience seem to assume that business people accept literally the platitude that "the customer is always right."

If that statement were applied uncritically, most businesses would soon be out of business. Bankers don't let customers set interest rates on their loans, nor do hospitals ask patients how to set broken bones. In the same vein, recognizing students as customers does not mean allowing them to dictate what topics the curriculum should include or what grades they should receive.

Thus, viewing students (or the employers who state what graduates should know) as customers need not, as some argue, lead to pandering. But if not, what does the concept mean? It is useful to distinguish between customers as consumers of products and customers as consumers of services.

Customers as consumers of products

To the degree – as my coffee-break colleagues noted – that students "don't know what they don't know," it would be improper to allow them to dictate the specifications of the educational product. In the long run, customers would lose respect for an organization or its product if R&D or quality control were put in the hands of amateurs with short-term agendas. That's true of the college curriculum as well. The faculty can never abdicate its responsibility to ensure that what we teach reflects the hierarchy of knowledge in our disciplines.

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What customer-driven organizations know, however, is that giving voice and listening to the people you serve is always essential and pays dividends. This is especially true in fields like health care and education, where the end "product" (health, learning) depends on the customer's active participation. In classrooms, for example, it's tempting for professors to assume that they are the ultimate experts on every topic and how it should be learned. With larger numbers of adult students in our classrooms, though, it's likely that on any given night someone in class knows more from direct experience about a particular subject than the professor does. At the same time, faculties dismiss at their peril what students know about their own learning styles and needs.

When creating the 777, we might note, Boeing invested heavily in consulting not only with the airlines that would buy the plane, but with passengers who would fly in it. It's difficult to imagine Boeing adopting a customer's product suggestion that would endanger anyone's safety. But the engineers who designed that plane reported surprise at all the things they hadn't thought of. Their willingness to listen resulted in a superior aircraft.

Customers as consumers of services

When it comes to viewing customers as consumers of a service, most of us would agree that the customer is at least usually right. That's what each of us feels, isn't it, when we are on the receiving end of a service? We're quick to condemn the discourteous, slow, or unresponsive service we receive at a bank, service station, or department store. Why shouldn't students feel the same way about the services provided by our institutions?

With this distinction in mind, it seems fair to ask what students are entitled to by virtue of being customers of higher education. Further, in what ways are the organizations that employ our graduates also our customers? Here are five ways that colleges and universities can appropriately respond to students and their employers.

1. Create a culture that focuses on student learning instead of teaching. In college, the motto of my accounting teachers was "cover the material." I'm not suggesting that they didn't know their stuff – quite the contrary. It just seemed that getting through the text by the end of the quarter was the goal – if students learned some accounting along the way, that was nice too.

But whose goal – and what customer was thus served? The goal of postsecondary educators should be that every one of our graduates knows and is able to do what his or her degree implies. Our business, then, is learning – not offering courses or covering the material.

Happily, most college classes are taught by instructors who know their subject matter and have high expectations for student performance. These are necessary but insufficient conditions for learning, however. Students also deserve "rich" learning environments. They deserve teachers who use methods that recognize differences in learning styles, and who understand that students will learn more if they are actively involved in their own learning. Students also deserve the right to learn from one another – a process that requires a teacher who can facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and expertise.

Our students further deserve answers to their questions, a clear understanding of expectations, rich and ample feedback on their work, real access to their teachers, and a learning environment that encourages them to take the personal risk of challenging, questioning, and exploring without fear of ridicule. What we give, we can then expect in return.

The assumptions upon which a learning culture depends are quite different from those for a culture emphasizing teaching. In the former, the student is at the center; in the latter, the subject matter. When student learning is the focus, the yardstick is not "Did I cover the material?" but "Did they learn what they should have?" A student (or employer) expects this. It is always the student's responsibility to learn, but the good sense of that must be met by teachers who will do everything possible to facilitate it.

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2. Accept the responsibility to teach more than the course content. Numerous studies have identified the skills needed for our students to become productive as knowledge workers. Those skills include the ability to write clearly and persuasively, to articulate and present ideas to others orally, to work capably in group and team settings, and to analyze and think critically about problems. A college education should teach these abilities as well as the subject matter of a field. But the attitude of some college teachers is an adamant, "That's not my job."

It is foolhardy to expect that a lone, required course in writing, public speaking, or critical thinking will be sufficient to develop these competencies. They require a longer-term process of development (and practice), which means they have to be the aim of a learning process extending across the curriculum. The objection that "we don't have time" to teach these abilities and the subject matter betrays a poverty of aims and an ignorance of the learning process. Indeed, we can use development of these competencies to teach disciplinary knowledge more effectively; as we do so, students become more involved and effective in their own learning. Because of this link, we don't have time not to teach them.

Some students, especially some of the younger ones, won't welcome these ideas – so much for the customer always being right. Teachers will need to persuade students that these activities will prepare them better for the future. Also, students aren't the only customers here. The organizations that do or will employ them, as well as the larger society, are also customers to whom we must respond and these are the very abilities they demand of our graduates.

3. Involve students in establishing the objectives for their learning. Regardless of age, all of us are students of subjects about which we are ignorant; we have limited abilities to make decisions about what to learn because we don't know what we don't know. However, if the literature of psychology tells us anything, it is that goal setting and task performance go hand in hand. Simply handing all students the same canned task seldom brings the personal engagement necessary to learning, especially for adults. To maximize that engagement, each student should have a part in setting goals for learning and have a measure of independence and control over the

doing of assignments. This doesn't mean that teachers should abdicate their responsibility for creating a coherent curriculum. It does mean that they can't hope to do so alone.

4. Make administrative services available to students at times, in places, and in ways that meet their needs. Treating students as customers requires support services that are convenient and accessible to them. Many colleges and universities enroll increasing numbers of commuting students, many of whom are working adults. For these students, services offered between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, present real barriers to participation.

Students often report being forced to drop out or to take much longer to graduate than hoped because classes are often available only during "normal" business hours or only during semesters when certain professors are around. They might prefer to buy books on the way home from work or, better still, by phone or on the Internet; they can't afford to take off work to meet with an academic counselor at 10 in the morning. Soon enough, an institution's commuters come to see responses to their needs taking a back seat to those they perceive to be the real customers of the institution – its faculty and administrators.

Having customers implies giving prompt, courteous, and responsive service. It suggests following through on our commitments to them, returning their phone calls, and not making them feel they are bothering us (as in "This would be a great place to work if it weren't for those – ed students"). It requires that we treat them as we expect to be treated when we are on the receiving end of a service.

5. Listen to the corporate customer. In my interactions with colleagues who've spent most of their adult lives in higher education, I often sense condescension toward people who chose business as a career. Too many professors think they are better and smarter than those who chose the other path – that higher education is a purer, worthier pursuit.

But my executive friends are as bright, capable, well-rounded, and virtuous as my professor friends. As responsible executives, they know what they need in employees and don't think it too much to ask that higher education assume a share of the burden for preparing them. In many cases, they're footing the bill for their employees' education. They've also found educators who are arrogant and unwilling to listen when they try to make this point.

Contrary to academic belief, business people do not want narrowly educated employees. They recognize the value of people who understand more than just their own jobs. And they believe that the practical and the theoretical can indeed be married. Some give and take on both sides, then, could result in real improvement in the product of higher education.

In sum: having "customers" in higher education doesn't mean pandering. It doesn't mean the customer is always right. It doesn't mean we never say no. It does mean treating people with respect. It means listening and adapting. It means balancing the goals of a liberal education with those of a practical education without diminishing the worth of either.

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This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum.

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