

ELEVATING CUSTOMER SERVICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

When Customer Service Meets Higher Education

Consider the following organizational values:

1. Creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome.
2. Acting with courage, challenging the status quo.
3. Being present, connecting with transparency, dignity, and respect.
4. Our commitment to creativity, technology, and innovation generates unparalleled experiences that drive long-term value...
5. We do the right thing, all the time.
6. We care about the well-being and success of every person.
7. We make a difference in every community we serve.
8. We respect and listen to our people.

Since institutions of higher education are generally committed to enhancing diversity and community, providing for student success, and being places of education and caring, each of these core values could easily belong to a college or university; but this isn't the case. In

fact, all of these statements come from companies known for providing exceptional customer service.



Which Organization's Values?

Look at the eight statements on the previous page. All eight came from one of these four companies recognized for its customer service: **Starbucks**, **Disney**, **Hilton**, and **Wegmans** supermarkets.

Exercise!

Try to guess which organization produced which statement—then check the answer key on page 7.

This fun exercise is also telling. Why are these the values of Disney or Starbucks—rather than the values of our local college or university? Once considered to be the ivory tower—revered and followed by society—academe has learned that it cannot rest on its historic or academic laurels any longer. In the changing landscape of higher education, colleges and universities increasingly have to compete to enroll and retain students who are “shopping” for better facilities, better services, better curricular and cocurricular opportunities, and better potential for getting a job (all at a reduced price).

It's in this context that colleges and universities are considering how to provide excellent service to students as customers. Yet there remains frequent resistance to considering college students as customers. The authors of this book contend that “students” and “customers” do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Perhaps the most pervasive argument against students as customers arises from how our colleagues understand a customer service concept from the early 1900s in London, when store owner Henry Gordon Selfridge adopted the

philosophy, "the customer is always right." For over a century, this adage has been used widely, but there are many philosophical holes in this theory. We know that customers often need correcting; the customer *isn't* always right. Applying "the customer is always right" to students isn't appropriate or realistic in higher education, and we need to allay our colleagues' fears that this is what we mean by "customer service."

One way to understand what *do* we mean when we talk about providing students with improved customer service is to refer to our own experiences. As a customer, what do you expect and how do you like to be treated? The fact is that most customers don't expect to be right all the time; rather, they expect to be heard. As a customer, you probably have the following expectations—you expect providers to:

- Treat you with respect;
- Value your time;
- Listen to you;
- Apologize when things don't go as promised;
- Offer you the experience that was advertised;
- Care about your experience;
- Help you understand why specific decisions are made (whether you agree or not).

We contend that each of these is true of the expectations of most customers—and is true of students in higher education. There are many commonalities between "students" and "customers." By dispelling the illogical fear

that if we treat students as customers they might demand specific grades, or feel entitled to a certain kind of conduct, we can hold a more thoughtful conversation about what it really means to approach students as customers.

A Roadmap for Using This Book

This book will be helpful to you whether or not you fully buy into the concept of students as customers. If your interest is to enhance student satisfaction, provide for a better student experience, improve retention, or make your office environment more conducive to getting work done, you will find many tips and tools to assist. This book also addresses other “customers” in higher education besides students—staff, faculty, parents, alumni, and community members, etc.

Each section will provide you with practical, hands-on exercises and/or worksheets to help you dig into your own customer service challenges in higher education. Throughout the book, you will see worksheets and exercises to help you investigate issues more deeply. Watch for:



Consider This...



Exercise!



Fun Fact!

The book consists of 8 sections:

Section 1: Learning from Service Industry Leaders

This section will provide insight into industry leaders known for providing excellent customer service including Marriott and Hilton, Starbucks, Disney, Universal, and more. Specific research and examples, including the customer service philosophy behind each model, will be outlined for application in higher education settings.

Section 2: Developing Service Competencies

This section will provide a roadmap for identifying the service competencies needed to provide excellent customer service in higher education based on general and specific functional areas.

Section 3: How to Support Frontline Staff in Enhancing Customer Service

This section will discuss frontline staff and their specific role in providing high-level customer service. Strategies for coaching and supporting frontline staff, as well as insight into ways to manage stress, will be covered.

Section 4: Scripting and Service Excellence

This section will discuss the benefits of “scripting” in higher education. Phone greetings, responses to regular questions, and ways to manage complaints will be highlighted. Training staff and students on the use of scripts will also be covered.

Section 5: Creating Environments that Facilitate Customer Service

This section will cover the creation of physical environments that facilitate positive interactions with customers in higher education.

Section 6: Policies and Practices that Impact Customer Service

This section will discuss the myriad of policies and practices used in higher education and their impact on customer satisfaction. Gaining an understanding of federal, state, institutional, and office-specific policies and practices will be discussed and reviewed. Specific focus on developing institutional policies and practices that enhance customer service will be reviewed.

Section 7: Cultivating Faculty and Staff Buy-In

This section will discuss how some campus partners may not immediately buy into the concept of enhancing customer service in the higher education setting and outline strategies to increase participation.

Section 8: Post-Secondary Examples of Customer Service Excellence

This section will discuss specific examples of colleges and universities who are implementing policies, practices, and philosophies to enhance customer service on-campus. Examples of institutions who are known for providing excellent customer service, as well as schools who are new to implementing new strategies, will be discussed.

We hope that the material in this book will capture your interest in improving experiences for your customers, challenge you and your team, and facilitate your own creativity. If you have questions or comments for the authors, or for Academic Impressions, please reach out to us. After all, you are the customer and while you may not always be right, you deserve to be heard.

GET CERTIFIED AS A CUSTOMER SERVICE PRO

Become a customer service expert by attending one of Academic Impressions' certification trainings. These events provide in-depth instruction with top customer service experts in higher education, and allow plenty of time for role-playing and practicing the core skills of good customer service. The conference culminates in a final written exam and you will receive a certificate of completion for your time spent and knowledge gained at this event. Show that your campus is a leader in customer service: get your entire front-line staff certified! We also provide on-campus certification workshops.

Interested? Contact Amit Mrig, President, Academic Impressions:

amit@academicimpressions.com

SECTION 1: LEARNING FROM SERVICE INDUSTRY LEADERS

Lead author for this chapter: Emily Richardson.

So where does one begin with creating a customer service philosophy for their department, school, or university? A focus on customer service may be newer to higher education, but because it isn't new everywhere. One place to look is at examples of excellence outside of the higher education sector, in business and industry. The concept of service has changed dramatically with the advent of Internet retailers, but even web-based retail models have made a conscious decision about their philosophy to enable them to meet the customer's needs. We are also seeing an additional change, one that focuses on self-service and only requires human intervention when the situation can't be handled through basic self-service. So when did service become so important to everything that we do?

In 1982, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. wrote a book called *In Search of Excellence*, which catalogued the business practices behind successful companies. One of the key factors listed in the book was "close to the customer," and they used the phrase to describe such companies as Disney, Marriott Hotels, and Neiman Marcus. One statement that rings true for higher education that should be considered when thinking about service is: "a simple summary of what our research uncovered on the customer attribute is this: the excellent companies really

are close to their customers. That's it. Other companies talk about it; the excellent companies do it" (p. 156).

This book was followed three years later by a book titled *Service America! Doing Business in the New Economy*, written by Ron Zemke and Karl Albrecht. In the book, Zemke and Albrecht declared that the current economy was actually the service economy. They talked about the importance of managing the service encounter by designing a service system and hiring the right people. These books led the way for retailers, hotels, and businesses thinking about customer service more seriously for the first time. There was a realization that those who were working hard at giving their customers superior service were producing the best results.

This also led to an entire group of books focused on what a company needs to do to serve customers well and to get the customer to return. This is a simple statement, but one that is powerful: a restaurant or a hotel wants a repeat customer, because repeat business is less expensive than advertising to find a new customer. In higher education, it is the same thing: we want a student to return the next semester, an alumni to return to campus or to provide a donation, a conference participant to recommend the school to their child, an attendee at a sporting event, or a musical performance to return again to the campus. While higher education is unique in many ways, in this respect we are the same as any other business: we want and need our customers to return again.

The Research on Customer Service

At the same time that Peters and Waterman were writing their books, Jan Carlzon became the president of Scandinavian Airlines, which was having financial trouble.

He adopted the concept of a moment of truth, which he described as follows in his book *Moments of Truth*:

“Anytime a customer comes into contact with any aspect of a business, however remote, is an opportunity to form an impression.”

The idea was that every employee, regardless of their job or title, had an opportunity to make an impression on a customer.

To illustrate this concept, let me share an example of a “moment of truth” from my own experience. Preparing for a recent trip to a conference, my administrative assistant accidentally made a mistake with the flight reservation. The day before the trip, I had no way to check in online because the name on my driver’s license did not match the name on the ticket. The name on the ticket was that of my administrative assistant!

The phone call to the airline yielded an hour wait time, so—living close to the local airport—the airline’s ticketing desk became the next logical stop. The phone call to the airline yielded an hour wait time, so—living close to the local airport—that became the next stop. The wait in line for a ticket agent went quickly, but I wasn’t anticipating a great result. I knew the mistake had been made and that typically airlines will charge for reservation changes, so I fully expected to walk away saddled with fees.

When I reached the counter, though, the result blew me away. The agent listened, empathized, and then explained that although the current ticket would not be valid, they could issue a voucher for future travel to my administrative assistant. This was great for her, but it still didn’t solve my need for travel for the next day to speak at a conference. The agent continued to listen, and then proceeded to issue a new ticket. Not only was it a new ticket, but it was issued

at the same rate used for the original ticket, and—by way of apology for the experience I had had on the phone—they also upgraded the ticket and provided me with access to the airport lounge! Through that interaction, the employee made me a lifetime customer. This was what Carlzon described as a moment of truth.

Take a moment to think about this in the context of your own life. Have you had an experience, say, in a restaurant where the host or hostess sat you on time and the server was superb, but then the wine sommelier treated you poorly when you asked the difference between a Merlot from Argentina and one from Australia? Each individual in this story makes up the full service experience, and everyone has a chance to make their own impression with you as the customer.

In 1993, Ken Blanchard (the author of *The One Minute Manager*) co-authored with Sheldon Bowles a book titled *Raving Fans, A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service*. This book features the tale of a man named Charlie, who helps a manager determine the three secrets for developing customers into “raving fans.” The first key is to **Decide what you want** by creating a vision of perfection centered on the customer.

Do you have a vision for customer service at your institution of higher education? Can you paint that picture for others? A service strategy is a distinctive formula for delivering service that is valuable for the customer. Disney’s is simple: “To make people happy.” You might find hints in the mission or vision statement for your institution as to the expectations for students. But remember that customers can be parents, alumni, coworkers, conference attendees, AND prospective students to name just a few. A customer service strategy must be applicable to all.



Exercise!

Create a Vision Board

What is your vision for what your customers should experience? A vision board may help you and your team establish ideas. Print photos or phrases from the Internet, or cut pictures and words from magazines that represent what you want to offer your customers. Paste these to a poster board and hang it in the office for quick reminders and encouragement!

Charlie, the main character in Blanchard and Bowles' book, then explains that you need to **Discover what the customer wants**. You can better understand what the customer wants if you first have your own vision. Then, the customer's vision will help you fill in the gaps and determine what to ignore. One idea to help you discover what your customers want would be to hold a focus group comprised of different types of customers and ask them what they think about your vision statement—what is missing and what is important. Your work group might think, for example, that communicating weekly to your student population is enough to keep them apprised of activities happening on campus, but you might learn from your focus group that in fact bi-weekly communication would be better due to the sheer number of emails they receive.

The third secret is to **Deliver plus one**. This secret is about developing the consistency that must be present every time a customer experiences service within your organization. There is no question that consistency of service within any specific office can make a difference. Recently at my own institution, it was requested that a

department on campus continue to serve students in the same way that they always had—yet their department had been reorganized, and half of the employees had been moved to a new location with different duties. The expectation for maintaining consistency in this case was impossible due to the work obligations of those left within the department. **Deliver plus one** was not the standard, and all consistency was lost. Providing consistent service must be a key component in all staffing decisions, and yet it is often not considered during times of change.



Consider This...

Read *Raving Fans*

Consider reading Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles' book together, as a department. Then hold a brown bag lunch to discuss the book, and have team members discuss how this book applies to your department.

There is another book I recommend—*Fabled Service, Ordinary Acts, Extraordinary Outcomes*—that was written by Betsy Sanders in 1995. It is a story about how a company can reach what they call “fabled service,” and it features retailer Nordstrom as the primary example. But what actually *is* fabled service? The book defines it as such: “Service only becomes significant (fabled) when it is so meaningful to your customers that they articulate and proclaim it.”

Think about this statement personally. When was the last time you received such excellent service that you raved about it to your friends and neighbors? The extraordinary

service you received was so great, that you are willing to tell others about your experience.

Star ratings in the online world have become the way an individual “proclaims” their impression about a product. Amazon often sends requests for an individual to rank the packaging or delivery from a vendor they use. After a trip, Travelocity will ask you to rate your experience through the use of stars. *Fabled Service* was written before the Internet explosion, yet the ability to tell others about service has become even more accessible with your iPhone or Android device.

To achieve *Fabled Service*, the book recommends that you think more broadly about service in general:

- Think as your customer thinks; the customer defines fabled service.
- Realize that service is everything your company does, and thus becomes everyone’s job.
- Integrate service into everything you do.
- Service is a cost of doing business, and you need to design the system right.
- Service can and will impact revenues.
- Focus on the growth of those in your company who serve others.

In 2004 we saw *The Fred Factor* by Mark Sandborn reach the best seller list. In 2013, Sandborn published *Fred 2.0: New Ideas on How to keep delivering Extraordinary Results*, and once again we learned more about Fred, his postman, who consistently delivered service in simple yet remarkable

ways. Can you imagine getting flowers on Mother's day from your postman? This is not a book about normal or average workers. Instead, this is a book about those individuals who are choosing to be extraordinary in the way they treat those whom they serve. Think about this quote from Fred: "I like doing things for people because it makes me feel better. I know I've done a good job if I take care of my customers—although I don't think of them as customers; I think of them as my friends or the folks on my route. Some people may not even have a clue what I've done for them, but that's okay. I don't do it so they'll know—I do it because it's the right thing to do."

Can you think of individuals at your university who are just average? Most of us certainly can. By contrast, it is much harder to think of those who are extraordinary all the time. Yet for us to achieve excellence in customer service, we need individuals who are committed to working with passion and to providing the best service possible to every employee.

The Recent Growth of a Service Focus in Higher Education

The book *Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education* by Dr. Neal Raisman paints a bigger picture of customer service in higher education. "Colleges are starting to see higher education in business-like realities. They are realizing that revenue depends on selling the college (recruitment) to its customers (students and parents). Sales (enrollment) are made based on the college's brand (image), product (courses, programs, degrees), and by

creating a connection with the customer (customer service).”

In light of the current economy, political climate, and widespread competition, many universities are seeing decreases in revenue, lower retention rates, and universal cutbacks. In response, service excellence within higher education has become an idea that more administrators are welcoming on their campuses.

Five years ago, there were approximately 10 higher education institutions providing a university-wide customer service program. Those institutions were mostly in the state of Georgia because of a governor mandate that any state monies for education must have some sort of service focus. In 2017, we have been able to identify at least 118 institutions with a program specifically focused on customer service within higher education.

As much as some people in colleges and universities may still cringe at the term “customer service,” colleges and universities are businesses at their core and must address the reality of customer service in higher education settings. The reality of increased competition in higher education, the rising expectations of customers, and the challenge of retention are three main reasons why we are seeing unprecedented growth in the number of customer service programs in higher education.

Increased Competition in Higher Education

The increased competition in higher education contributes to the need for better service and a more student-focused experience. Universities and colleges are much more competitive due to the new options available for learning. In the 1990s, an online college degree was not an option,

let alone an online college class; whereas, today many such programs exist. Thanks to the ease of transportation and modern technology, students today are more able and willing to travel to an out-of-state school than they were decades ago. Today, there are also a variety of avenues by which students can achieve a college degree and define the experience. There are more schools to attend, to transfer into, and from which to graduate.

Years ago, the idea of free education was laughable. In April 2017, New York lawmakers approved a scholarship proposed by Governor Andrew Cuomo that would be available to individuals whose families earn \$125,000 or less annually. The scholarship would cover all tuition for two- and four-year public colleges. While other states may offer free community college, New York is the first to make free tuition available at four-year public colleges, and there is sure to be a ripple effect to colleges competing for that same student.

Rising Expectations of Our Customers

Students and their families have greater exposure than ever to the available options provided by different colleges, and with that exposure comes higher expectations. They can compare and contrast with a standard of what they are looking for in and throughout the college experience. If one school rolls out the red carpet for incoming students (e.g., provides a luncheon with an opportunity to meet future faculty and staff), while another school only sends a form letter, students who experience the latter may respond with disappointment. This is especially the case if the incoming student's family or friends have experienced the other, more personal level of service instead.

Customers will have basic expectations when it comes to service and how they want to be treated. Boyd (2012) shares specific tips that academic advisers and other

institutional officials can follow to provide quality service when interacting with a student, and these are applicable to the expectations of any customer:

- Treat students with dignity and respect. This is a basic human necessity and right.
- Give students clear directions on how to solve their problems and issues. Students should not be given the runaround. 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.
- Be responsive to students and their parents. “If you tell a parent you will call them back today, then call them back today” (Ewers, p. 2). Being true to your word means a lot to students and their families.
- Provide timely answers to students’ questions and give regular feedback on their progress.

These tips are specific to individual service interactions, but it is even better if an institution as a whole takes the time to identify and learn about the expectations of its various customers. Based on that student’s background or story, what one customer expects may be very different from what another would expect.

The Challenge of Retention

The concept of “if you treat them well, they will stay” seems to make a service program seem very simplistic. But there is in fact some truth to that concept.

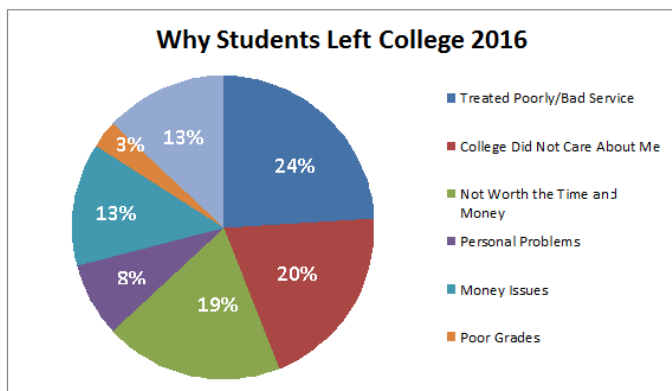
Why do students leave college? Does service have anything to do with students transferring to another school?

Dr. Neal Raisman's research shows that 44 percent of students nationwide leave a university due to the perception that they were treated poorly or that the college didn't care about them. This research is shared in the chart on the next page, and such information about retention is the foundation for Coastal Carolina University's service initiative. Coastal Carolina University (CCU) launched a service excellence initiative in 2012 called Feel the Teal®. (You can read more about the initiative in Section 8 of this book.) CCU's university-wide customer service plan is designed to improve service delivery and increase customer satisfaction and retention. Raisman's research is shared with all new employees to stress the importance of service excellence and how it ties to retention.

According to Raisman's study:

Twenty-four percent of college students will leave because of the perception that they were treated poorly or received bad service.

Students are consumer-oriented. They see themselves as customers who should be treated well, especially as the cost of attending college continues to rise. Students clearly relate the amount they are paying to the way they believe and feel they should be treated and served. Participants in the study did not necessarily link paying tuition to a sense of privilege, but they did indicate that they expect high-quality service in exchange for the amount of money they were paying. One student elaborated on this perspective in the study: "I am paying a lot of money and I don't care that she said they were understaffed. For what I am paying, they should have more staff and better service."



Source:

<http://academicmaps.blogspot.com/2016/09/why-students-left-college-2016-neal.html>

Many students cited that they had trouble getting help when they needed it, described “sour-faced clerks hassling them,” and reported being sent from office to office in search of a solution. All too often, their problem or issue remained unresolved, even after “the shuffle.” Students stated that they were often unable to find a satisfactory solution or even proper attention to their request for assistance.

Twenty percent of students will leave due to the perception the college/university doesn’t care about them.

In this scenario, students are made to feel like a number and because of that, it is easier for them to leave. This is an important statistic since it clearly points to a lack of engagement on the part of colleges with these students. This data is a useful reminder that everyone has a natural need to feel valued and welcomed if they are to engage back. We must find ways to build connectedness with students through person-to-person engagement that

extends beyond social media. If a student perceives that he or she is not cared about or does not belong, that student will be much more likely to drop out and seek another person, group, or college that values and welcomes him or her in a more meaningful way.

A common statement made by students in the study was “all they cared about was my money but after that they paid me no attention.” This indicates that colleges are not engaging students as well as is necessary to keep them. Schools need to maintain positive contact with students and engage them with some activity or aspect of the college. The Citadel and other military schools create engagement through shared experiences and a pride in the school’s corps. Engagement makes students feel closer to the school, and thus a part of it, and that helps to overcome the feeling that they are attending a faceless institution that does not care for or about them.

Nineteen percent of students will leave because they believe that what they are going through does not have value and is not worth it.

This is related to the cost and service issues of the most common response, as discussed above. Students are coming to campus with a very strong return on investment proposition. College is supposed to lead to a job and a career: students go to college to get the education and training they need to get hired. However, they are hearing from the media that many students who graduate from college today are not getting jobs, or are working in areas not related to their area of study. This causes them to be wary about the amount of money and time they are putting in, so—more than ever—they are demanding a clear return on their investment.

Regarding the benefits of good customer-student relationships, Emery, et al., said, “Student-customer satis-

faction directly correlates to larger enrollments: Happy students stay in school, so retention rates remain high; happy students tell their high-school friends, so recruitment numbers are higher..." (p. 2). More students generate more tuition revenue, and in the current economic reality, this tells us that service excellence must be threaded throughout higher education operations and practices.

For colleges and universities that place a vision and value on service excellence, rewards can translate into increased revenue through improved recruitment and retention, reduced recruitment costs, improved service and satisfaction, quicker yield conversions, and closer internal working relationships. This term of "customer service" is still new and somewhat foreign in higher education, but it is sure to give the institutions that embrace it a competitive advantage in the future. To seize that advantage, it's important to see what lessons we can learn from successful high-service organizations in other industries that have a long track record of providing excellent service.

Examples from High-Service Organizations Today

It is one thing to talk about customer service theory, but quite another to see it in action. There are multiple other organizations for us to consider and learn from. They include hotels, resorts, restaurants, grocery stores, and other online retailers. Each one recognized here has service to the customer as a key to their vision and strategy.

Delivering WOW service has been made famous by Zappos, since WOW is their #1 core value. Their mission has been aligned around the concept of providing the best