Are College Students Customers or Products?

After nearly a quarter of a century in higher education teaching at a variety of universities, I have come to the conclusion that those schools, and virtually every institution of higher learning in America, can be summarized divided into colleges that see students as customers and colleges that see students as products. Other dimensions of differentiation—urban versus rural, large versus small, private versus public, graduate versus undergraduate, liberal arts versus professional—are not as vital in understanding the nature of a college as the customer/product metaphor.

As with any myth, the customer/product characterization is overdrawn. To the extent that colleges and universities are continually redesigning curricula, offering new courses, and modernizing facilities to meet changing needs and demands—students are customers. To the extent that schools shape academic life so that graduates reflect a particular intellectual bent or moral suasion—students are products. Since, nearly all colleges try to satisfy students' needs and wants while attempting to mold their minds, the facile answer to the title question is "both." The distinguishing trait of a college or university is not whether it treats students as customers or products, but where the accent is placed.

Colleges that view students primarily as customers exude a marketing orientation. They are overtly conscious of enrollment management, spending a majority of their time and effort projecting trends in applicant pools (industry demand) and forecasting anticipated admission (market share). Student psychographics are analyzed carefully as these schools try to figure out students' desires and how best to satisfy them. The promotional materials of these institutions are polished, slick, and replete with phrases such as, "Twenty percent of this year's graduates received degrees in programs the college didn't offer ten years ago."

Colleges that see students as products cast a different shadow. Their promotional efforts are apt to be modest, even quaint. No videos here. Recruiting literature is usually sent upon request, not mass mailed. It tends to feature successful alumni discussing how their education prepared them for life after college and not, as is often the case for customer-oriented colleges, current students expressing their satisfaction with daily campus life. The curriculum is stable, some might say static. It absorbs innovations such as the computer into existing programs rather than designing new programs to accommodate breakthroughs. The educational focus is on the metamorphosis students will undergo during their course of study regardless of the specific major.
chosen. Customer colleges tout the variety of majors available, especially the new ones added in response to student interests.

Whatever one's personal preference, it is clear that both approaches have their pros and cons. Customer colleges often characterize themselves as caring, and they usually are. These schools are particularly sensitive to the little things that students find so frustrating and unnerving. This caring attitude begins with a thorough freshmen orientation that frequently involves the housing of parents on campus as part of the support system helping students to make the transition from high school to college. Customer colleges follow up this with student-friendly advising and registrations. Course selection, including add-drop, is quick and accurate, all but eliminating the exasperating experience of waiting in line for hours only to learn that a required class has just closed. Parking spaces are abundant. These colleges even do their utmost to satisfy that most fickle of students' tastes—their palates—by defying the wisdom of the ages which says nothing short of gourmet food will convince students that they are being fed anything but a steady diet of lukewarm swill.

By contrast, product colleges make no special efforts to accommodate students, appearing in the extreme to be callous when it comes to students' concerns about campus life, food, food, advising, registration, parking, and the like. Providing amenities is not a high priority at these institutions. Indeed, at a small number—military colleges come readily to mind—suffering through some of life's unpleasantness is part of the process by which students are forged into the shape desired. Catering to students would be tantamount to pandering.

The responsiveness of customer colleges in comparison to their product-oriented counterparts is most evident in the curriculum. Catalogs as little as five years apart often reveal considerable change in academic offerings at customer colleges. Cognizant of shifting job opportunities and the career aspirations of students, customer colleges know what's hot and what's not, adding and dropping majors in response to the changing interests of their clientele. Because of this attentiveness, these schools have been particularly successful in meeting the educational needs of nontraditional students.

Product schools may vary course offerings, but seldom juggle the lineup of majors. New intellectual perspectives are integrated into the existing curriculum via course additions or embellishments, not new majors. The result of this purist approach is a list of academic majors that is relatively short and uncompromisingly constant.

The traditionalism of product schools smacks of a stodginess not found in the more freewheeling atmosphere of curriculum innovation prevalent at customer colleges. This creativity has its downside, however, as customer schools frequently resort to academic misrepresentation in their rush to introduce the new and improved.

Many a "new" major is created using existing courses, faculty, and facilities. The college simply packages what it already teaches into a new configuration and declares, like the Wizard of Oz, the new major a fait accompli. In my area of study, this practice is common among colleges lacking the will or the resources to offer a genuine program in international business, probably the hottest major in business administration today. The content of these ad hoc international business majors is a curious blending of standard courses in management and courses already on the books that have an international orientation such as international politics or comparative psychology. If specific courses in international business are offered, they are usually taught by faculty who have no special expertise in the area. As if all of that was not bad enough, the real clincher comes when, despite the title, the international business major has no foreign language requirement.

Even when customer colleges do inaugurate bonafide, well-resourced programs, they sometimes find themselves vulnerable to market shifts that turn fads into flops. A case in point is a small, private college in New York State which started a nursing program that soon became well-respected and recognized. In response to customer pressure, the college let the program grow to the point where 85 percent of its undergraduates were nursing majors. When, in the mid-1980s, large numbers of women decided they wanted to pursue other career paths, enrollments at the college declined sharply. Without viable programs in other majors to absorb this shock, the college was soon transformed from a healthy, vibrant institution to one whose very existence is now problematic.

Product schools are not immune from the vicissitudes changing social norms can have on enrollments. In the not-too-distant past, there were over 200 women's colleges in this country. By their very nature, most of these institutions were product oriented, providing an educational experience specifically designed to prepare women for life in a male-dominated world. When in the 1970s and early 1980s interest in all-female colleges began to wane and with it enrollments, many women's colleges went coed, shifting in the process, from a product orientation to a customer orientation.
Going coed in and of itself is not an indication of a change in orientation. The major service academies are all coed, yet clearly remain product institutions. Nevertheless, most of the colleges that have abandoned the commitment to educate only women did so because they felt compelled to respond to changing market forces in order to survive. These colleges were part of a broader movement toward a customer orientation in higher education, a movement precipitated by predictions of a serious shortfall in enrollments that would begin in the mid-1980s and eventually level off, but never be reversed.

In the face of such dire forecasts, many product colleges, uncertain as to their attractiveness and challenged by the marketing thrusts of rival institutions, decided to play it safe and switch to a customer orientation. The results in terms of enrollments have been spectacular for individual institutions in particular and higher education as a whole. That success is documented in the American Council on Education’s study, Campus Trends, 1988.

Based on a survey of 367 institutions, the report notes that the majority of American colleges have experienced a rise in enrollment since 1980. Increased enrollment of nontraditional, mostly older students, coupled with a higher college-attendance rate among high school graduates more than offset the large drop in the pool of traditional college students that occurred in this decade. To be sure, enrollment increases have not been universal. At least 40 percent of institutions have experienced a net decrease in enrollments since 1980. Nonetheless, the overall enrollment picture today defies the pessimistic predictions of a decade ago, and that came about because colleges became customer oriented, and did so with a passion.

From a business point of view, the selling of higher education has to be regarded as one of the most successful marketing campaigns ever launched in this country. The triumph of enrollment management has put broad smiles on the faces of many a college trustee, but not without costs. Students are well aware of their elevated importance in the scheme of things, and have been quick to use their leverage. When I first started teaching, colleges were ruthless when it came to dismissing students found to be academically deficient. Now, most colleges have more forms of academic probation than there are stations of the cross, and required withdrawals are nearly unheard of. Students prefer it that way, and all too many colleges have been eager to oblige. After all, the customer is always right.

Probably the single greatest flaw inherent in the commercialization of higher education is evident in the mission statements of customer colleges. Invariably, these declarations are vague and vague, lacking the clarity of vision exhibited in the mission statements of product schools. It is hard to convey a clear identity or sense of purpose when you are always asking students, “What do you want?” Product schools tell prospective students, “Here’s what we are, take it or leave it”—a haughty attitude some find irksome. Still, in a world where management guru Tom Peters has made a small fortune—no, make that a large one telling businesses to listen to their customers—you’ve got to admire the chutzpah.

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