
IDEAS, OBSERVATIONS, AND INQUIRY

**WHATEVER YOU DO, *DON'T* TREAT YOUR
STUDENTS LIKE CUSTOMERS!** _____

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Around campus, I frequently hear how "students are our customers," and that we should treat students like customers. On the surface, this seems a very reasonable and straightforward suggestion—especially because they're paying to be here. We all know the associated catchphrases, "the customer is always right," "the customer is king," "get close to the customer," "customer-focused service," "customer-driven marketing," "customer-based quality," and so forth. But, given our educational mission, does treating our students like "customers" make sense?

Under the customer metaphor, we find students buying their education and shopping around for classes and majors; our goal as educators becomes attracting and retaining students for our courses. What the students desire out of their college experience starts driving programs. Resources follow students, and departments are rewarded in direct proportion to the number of students (customers) who choose to attend (buy) their classes (i.e., full-time equivalent [FTE]). Classes become popularity contests. Pedagogy becomes entertainment—with MTV and video games as the models. Flexibility and customization are the buzzwords; a flood of self-designed majors, conveniently rescheduled exams, and rule-bending exceptions the result. The

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ultimate outcome is unrelenting grade inflation—keep the student-cum-customer happy and give him or her what they want. We're getting the "Nordstromization" of education, where universities become a new breed of shopping mall and our role as educators is to delight our customers. This may not be true everywhere, but doesn't it sound familiar?

Although it is true that students exercise educational choices and pay for their educational opportunities, they are not simply customers. The job of education is not to delight the students—at least not in the short-run. Education entails more than packaging and delivering knowledge to passive consumers. Students play a more active and integral part in their own educational process.

If the student is not our customer, then who is? Is it the parent who pays for their kids' education? Is it the employer who hires our graduates? Is it the board of trustees who oversee the institution that pays our salaries? In a way, it's all of them. Society is our customer. The task of education is to equip men and women to be effective participants in society—citizens. If we do this well, all of our stakeholders can be satisfied. If we don't accomplish this goal, none of the stakeholders will be satisfied. But this is an extremely long-term and liberal goal. We won't know if we've been successful for decades.

If students aren't our customers, then what are they? Some might argue that students are our products. They come to us as raw material, full of potential, in need of shaping and polishing into usable form. Value resides in the end-product—the culmination of a long, arduous, and intentional molding process. Of course, the products have no say in the manufacturing process. The canvas doesn't tell the painter what to paint. Where students are products, our schools resemble large-scale factories with regimentation into programs and segmentation into classes of homogeneously skilled peers. Using this metaphor, we have standardized and routinized education into a mass-production process. At the end, we certify our students' competence like so much meat bearing the inspector's "choice" or "grade-A" stamp of approval. In the march of mass production, schools worry more about moving people through the system than whether they're qualified. The public rewards schools for quantity (FTE), not quality.

Viewing students as products casts them in a fundamentally passive and submissive role. They are the by-products of knowledge. As teachers, we are often annoyed and disappointed by the frequent "will-this-be-on-the-midterm" and "just-tell-me-what-I-need-to-know" so I can "do-as-little-as-possible-to-pass" refrains. These sentiments, however, are simply symptoms of our educational models. Both the customer and product metaphors cast

students into passive do-onto-me roles and put instructors into an adversarial relationship with their students. Teachers become subservient to their “customers” and/or dominating over their “products.” Alienated from the learning process, students view education as something to be endured, not embraced.

For me, education is about developing skilled and effective adults. Each word of this mission is important. “Skilled” entails a certain amount of specialization and/or expertise, “effective” implies the personal and interpersonal competence to achieve one’s objectives. “Adult” is used to connote maturity, which has nothing to do with age. Being mature means having a clear sense of personal accountability and self-responsibility, being self-aware, and understanding both one’s independence and interdependence with one’s fellows. Maturity entails a well-articulated set of personal values and the wherewithal to live them out. In short, education is about developing character.

By character, I mean the internal resources, knowledge, and discipline to know one’s own mind and the resolve to pursue its direction. Character is based on beliefs, nourished by knowledge, forged in experience, and committed to values. A person of character has the ability to make things happen, persevere through adversity, forgo alternatives, and alter course. Character implies a mastery over one’s own will. Someone without such mastery would hardly be characterized as responsible (i.e., trustworthy and accountable) or a person of integrity (i.e., making actions congruent with values). This mastery is no accident. It is learned.

You can’t buy character, neither can it be forced on you. You have to attain it “the old fashioned way”—you must earn it. If this is true, the student-as-customer and student-as-product metaphors are misleading, if not misguided. We need a new guiding metaphor—one that treats students as partners in the educational process. Consider the parallel between the educational goal of character development and the pursuit of physical fitness.

The attainment of physical fitness requires effort and dedication on the part of the trainee. No one can give you fitness, nor can you simply buy it. Fitness is the direct result of sustained physical exercise. It is possible to achieve and maintain fitness on your own; however, the assistance and encouragement of a fitness trainer can help. But no matter how much the trainer exercises, it won’t change the trainee’s level of fitness. The trainees’ fitness is dependent on their active participation in the training process. As with physical fitness, the attainment of character requires effort and dedication on the part of the trainees/students. And just as they can exercise and attain fitness on their own, so too can they educate themselves—it’s not easy,

and it requires even more dedication, but it is possible. A character coach (educator/mentor) can greatly facilitate the educational process, but no amount of brilliance or scholarly output on the part of the faculty person can change the students' character. Students develop character only through active involvement in their educational progress.

Casting students as coworkers in the educational enterprise gives them the responsibility for their own education. It also transforms the role of the teacher from marketeer or manufacturer to coach and the task of teaching from packaging knowledge to partnering with people.

But casting students as coworkers is not a grant of equality. As trainer/coach, faculty are in the position of setting the agenda, but with the full realization that students bring much to the table and will ultimately determine the educational outcome they attain. We can design programs, deliver courses, give lectures, and grade papers, but we can't compel our students to learn. We, the faculty, will be judged (by society's stakeholders) for the quality of our graduates, but we are not solely responsible for, nor should we be held accountable for, their success. A fitness coach can take pride in his or her trainees' health, appearance and/or athletic performance, but he or she is only a partial contributor. Leading roles must be acknowledged for genetics, nutrition, and the trainee's own efforts and self-discipline. The same may be said for education, where we should acknowledge the role of genetics, upbringing, and the students' own initiative. By giving students a starring role in their own educational development, perhaps they'll have something other than endurance to celebrate at graduation.

The development of character, like fitness, takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. One can't cram for character. But it also doesn't just happen. Character must be built. Intentional activities, structured experiences, and monitored behavior are part of the process. But structure and required activities must be as carefully and intentionally removed as imposed.

Character eventually replaces external structure. In a way, character is the internal analog to external structure. If used wisely, external structure can assist in developing character by enabling and reinforcing some behavior while disciplining and delimiting other choices. But extended reliance on external structures and controls can perpetuate a lack of character and inhibit the development of character at all. The fitness metaphor has in it a useful developmental image.

A good trainer starts trainees out with light weights and easy workouts. Gradually, as the trainee improves, the trainer increases both weight and intensity. At my gym, there's a very intriguing new pull-up machine called

the Gravitron. Here's how it works: I stand on a small platform under a horizontal bar and key in my weight and the percent of my weight I want to lift. The machine then externally compensates for my weak muscles and helps me do pull-ups. I'm not doing real or full pull-ups, but with each attempt I get closer to that goal. Unfortunately, I won't always have a Gravitron machine around when I need to do a pull-up, so I shouldn't become dependent on it. In fact, my goal in using the machine is to wean myself off the machine and onto the pull-up bar by myself. In the same way, external structure serves a useful purpose early in the learning/developmental cycle as it compensates for underdeveloped internal qualities.

External structure can be relaxed as internal structure is developed. Early on, students need structure to compensate for lack of internal character, but external structure must be deliberately dismantled so that they assume personal responsibility for these functions. By the time people reach college, it is time to give them responsibility for choices that matter. Holding them accountable for these choices is also important. Here is where doing things for them (in the name of customer service) or to them (à la students-as-products) becomes dysfunctional.

Instead of external control and compliance, we need commitment and self-discipline. Instead of focused attention and passivity, we need creativity and active curiosity. Instead of the rote memorization of facts and theories, we need understanding and the application of knowledge. Instead of routinization and standardization, we need customization and specialization.

If character is the goal, then perhaps a university should be structured more like a fitness center than a factory or a shopping mall. Modern gyms are interesting creations. They are composed of specialized equipment, personnel, and surroundings that facilitate the attainment and maintenance of physical fitness. Convenience is crucial—they are located in neighborhoods, by businesses, and some are open 24 hours a day—but convenience alone will not produce fitness. Merely becoming a member or hanging around the gym will not lead to fitness. Fitness comes from exercise, and exercise is driven by personal commitment and motivation. To the novice, a gym can be a bewildering array of barbells, stairmasters, Nautilus doodads, and aerobic gizmos. Turning access to these resources into personal fitness is not automatic. For most people, some kind of routine is desirable, even necessary. At many gyms, there is an area set aside and organized for circuit-training—exercises on a specified set of machines in a certain order at a designated pace. These compose a generic, full-body workout. Such added structure helps those people who don't know where to begin or those without a

customized workout plan. Likewise, aerobic classes are very popular, not only because they are active, fun, and use popular music but also because one just has to follow the leader.

Structure can make things easier, but a good gym has more resources than just the training circuit or aerobic classes. Taking full advantage of all the resources means breaking out of the prepackaged programs. Every member is welcome to follow a personalized workout plan based on his or her unique situation and goals. This is where the resident fitness coach helps. Their knowledge and encouragement, coupled with the gym's resources, can produce a fitness plan customized to the member's needs.

Like a gym, a university presents a set of specialized resources in an environment focused on learning. Enrollment means access. Convenient access is vital—and is a function of cost, location, and scheduling—but accessibility alone does not produce education. Just being a student or hanging around a school does not build character. The array of resources at a university can be overwhelming. Arcane catalogs and schedules, rooms full of computers, mountains of books, irascible professors, and miles of hallways can be daunting to even the most stouthearted student. Like circuit-training and aerobics classes, many people find the more structured programs and activities to be extremely useful (e.g., general education, majors, student life activities, intramural sports, fraternities, etc.). Similar to a good gym, a good university needs a wide array of different resources that people may use in their own way and at their own speed. Faculty serve a dual role at the fitness-center university: They act as specialists in the university's resource pool and they act as character coaches helping to devise customized educational plans. But in the end, how the students use and combine the available resources will determine what they get out of their university membership.

How do we transform students—who may view themselves as educational consumers—from passive recipients into active educational partners? Perhaps this is the first task of our educational process. Unfortunately, more than 12 years of mass education have socialized students to abdicate exactly this responsibility. Undoing this programming probably starts with us, the educators. We must start operating by the new principles. We must become people of character ourselves, people of internal structure and coherence in a chaotic world. We, as coaches, must model the behavior we seek to propagate (Who would trust a flabby, out-of-shape fitness coach?). Moreover, our structures—both formal and informal—must be consistent with the new goals. Structure has a tendency to take on a life of its own, so we must be forever vigilant against creeping institutionalization. Finally, we must treat

our students with the respect and dignity they deserve as coworkers. We must see them as partners in the educational process and design our courses, majors, and programs with that in mind.

A fitness-center university will probably feel out of control at times. It will no doubt look messier and seem more confusing than the neat, assembly-line educational factories or the glamorous educational shopping malls, but it will also give better value to society and produce much more capable graduates.