

Customer Service and Student Respect: A Winning Combination

T. Hampton Hopkins

As the saying goes, "Some folks make you feel at home while others make you wish you were." When visiting the various points of student contact on campus, does the feedback indicate students feel at home or wish they were at home? Excellent customer service has been a strategic initiative in the private sector for many years, but higher education has been slower to accept it as a means for improving student satisfaction and retention. Those who regularly interact with students are not surprised by the growing student demand for improved service on campus. Although many in higher education argue that students are not customers in the traditional sense, this abstract argues that treating students as customers is an acceptable means of differentiating one college from another.

The purpose of this abstract is to engage practitioners in a discussion of customer service and student respect. Three major points include (1) customer service at the community college; (2) customer service and the student experience; and (3) developing a culture of excellence. Throughout this abstract is a discussion of respect as it relates to these concepts. While students certainly demand more from the colleges they attend, those in higher education have some responsibility for delivering quality service in a positive encounter through the culture of the campus. Improving service delivery can be an effective demonstration of enhanced student respect.

Customer Service at the Community College. Customer service is sometimes easier to define by what it is not than what it is; consequently, poor service, whether received on campus or elsewhere, is much easier to recall. Satisfaction is often defined not by the products consumed but by the service received, and many are quick to point out their bad experience. Even colleges with excellent academic reputations may have dissatisfied students due to poor customer service.

Simply put, customer service is the ability to meet customer expectations. This simple definition becomes complex when applied to community colleges because of the many departments students encounter along the path to education. From first contact in admissions, to faculty in the classroom, to graduation, students meet service opportunities at every step. A breakdown at any point may cause dissatisfaction, but a pattern of disservice leads to reduced student retention.

Meeting or exceeding expectations is often referred to as quality. Students may experience quality customer service in one area and poor service at another point. Therefore, student satisfaction is constantly changing and levels of satisfaction with the college are in a constant flux. Though some dissatisfaction is inevitable, the cumulative experience of the student and his or her expectations ultimately define this attitude. Moreover, because public education is often considered an entitlement, this connection between student satisfaction and college services becomes more firm. The student experience determines the level of satisfaction and the ultimate attitude of respect.

Customer Service and the Student Experience. There is much discussion on campus and in the literature about engaging students in the life of the college. The more students are involved, both in and out of the classroom, the more likely they will feel as though they are a part of the institution. When colleges practice avoidance instead of engagement, whether intentional or not, they create environments of mistrust and disrespect. It is not a far leap from engagement to satisfaction, and satisfied students are more likely to respect

the institution and its members. This respect can lead beyond mere satisfaction to loyalty; these students will have a positive story to tell.

Community college faculty and staff must seek to inspire students, not avoid them. Higher education is not a service delivered to students; it is a life event staged for students. It requires the participation of the entire community, including the students, in setting the stage and defining the outcomes. Consider the value of a committed ensemble of educators actively involved with creating a pleasant college experience. Such an environment would move colleges from the Deming way to the Disney way, from being concerned with the efficiency of serving students to the courtesy of identifying with the needs of the students in every interaction. After all, if colleges are seeking loyal students who will tell their story to others, practitioners must write the first chapter of that story.

Developing a Culture of Excellence. Many community colleges measure student satisfaction and have strategies that seek to engage students across the campus. However, if the culture of the college is not aligned with those efforts, it can sink even the best strategies. The culture of excellence begins with the college. The faculty and staff set the stage and create the environment by constantly seeking student (customer) contact and creating memorable experiences. This does not imply reducing academic standards or rigor, nor does it suggest colleges have to become service institutions. Developing this culture of excellence requires an inclusive campus environment that is open, exciting, and challenging.

There are barriers to creating this culture of excellence. First, college leaders must consider the student in every decision. Unilateral decision-making that fails to include student input is contrary to the culture of excellence. This is not about asking for student permission before making every decision; instead, it is about keeping inclusiveness and engagement at the forefront during the process. Second, think “student experience.” At Disney, employees see signs as they are entering the park that read, “Think Disney Experience, Not Just Service.” If community college personnel consistently, thoughtfully, and strategically focus on the student experience, excellence is likely to follow. Finally, student satisfaction can be fool’s gold; the idea of students merely being satisfied with the college does little to ensure a culture of excellence. Students must reach a point of loyalty with the college, which can occur through a strong culture in which everyone is committed to excellence.

Removing Barriers to Excellence. Customer service and student respect are not mutually exclusive. In fact, each complements the other, and respect is often dependent on service to thrive. One of the wisest decisions a college can make is to remove the barriers to excellence. Community colleges that truly commit to the idea of loyalty commit to quality for all students. The aphorism is about loyalty—creating experiences that make others want to keep coming back. Student loyalties develop from a collection of campus experiences and the stories they tell. Community colleges must focus the attention on students to create a culture that engages students and strengthens the overall student experience.

[Dr. T. Hampton Hopkins](#) is Dean of Student Services and Enrollment Management at Carolinas College of Health Sciences and owner of Hopkins Associates, a leadership and organizational development consulting firm.

Suggested citation: Hopkins, T. H. (2007, November). Customer service and student respect: A winning combination. *Leadership Abstracts*, 20(11). League for Innovation in the Community College Web site: <http://www.league.org/publication/leadership/>