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SERVICE WITH A SMILE: CUSTOMER SOVEREIGNTY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

BY MICHAEL DELUCCHI

Do college students view higher education as an academic convenience store where a degree is received in exchange for tuition checks? In a recent essay for *Academe*, sociologist Robert Bellah portrays students who approach their education with the attitude that college is just another consumer marketplace. He describes “undergraduates who, in arguing about a grade, said to their instructors, ‘I’m paying for this course,’ as though they felt they weren’t getting the value paid for.” Bellah’s piece is just one in a series of recent critiques by faculty of contemporary student culture. According to these faculty, consumer sovereignty in higher education conflicts with the goals of effective pedagogy. An undue emphasis on customer service inverts the professor-student relationship by vesting

authority in students as customers. This “undermines the concept of merit by contributing to the pernicious idea that students are customers, to be served only in ways they find pleasing.”

Scholars representing a variety of disciplines and academic institutions have written articles lamenting the prevalence of student consumerism on college campuses. This academic milieu is described as one in which students do not expect a higher education to involve effort, challenge, or constructive criticism. Rather, students expect to be amused, to feel comfortable and to put forth little effort, to be rewarded liberally for self-disclosure, whatever its quality or form, and to be given high grades in return for paying tuition and showing up.

Mark Edmundson, of the University of Virginia, describes students writing their evaluations of his teaching as “playing the informed consumer,

letting the provider know where he’s come through and where he’s not quite up to snuff.” Even faculty critical of this component of the evaluation process report adjusting their teaching styles in response to the customer orientation of today’s college students. In an essay that sharply critiques this form of market driven campus culture, Glenn Altschuler, of Cornell University, concedes that he “like(s) the applause” and is “not above a song and dance to keep ‘em in their seats.”

Student consumerism, an attitude that treats the university as a place to meet preestablished needs, has become a concern for college faculty across the nation. However, much of what has been written on student consumerism in higher education relies on anecdotes and personal observations. In an effort to make an empirical contribution to this discussion, my colleague (Dr. Kathleen Korgen at William Paterson University) and I conducted a pilot study on student consumerism at a mid-size public university. In this project, we administered a questionnaire to assess the extent to which students approach college with a customer service orientation. We included questions that asked students: 1) if they believe paying for their education entitles them to a degree; 2) how likely they would be to take an “easy A” course; 3) if they believe an instructor should take into account the grade they “need” in a course; 4) who is responsible for their attentiveness in class; and 5) how much time they devote to course work.

WHERE AND HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Our sample was obtained from a mid-size (approximately 9,000 undergraduates) public university in the Northeast. The student population is ethnically diverse, and comprised predominantly of traditional-age students. Data was derived from student responses to a 41-item questionnaire administered during the spring semester of 1999 in several undergraduate social science courses. The survey asked students to rate their behavior and attitudes toward

learning, faculty, grades, and several other aspects of their college experience. We used data from 195 questionnaires, representing student responses in required and elective courses. Descriptive statistics for the sample appear in Table 1.

STUDENT ENTITLEMENT

Do students approach higher education as an academic retail outlet in which they believe payment of tuition entitles them to a degree? We explored this issue by asking students to respond to the following questionnaire item (scored on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree): "If I'm paying for my college education, I'm entitled to a degree." Our results revealed that 42.5% of the students agreed with the statement, 22.8% were "unsure" and only 35.8% of the sample disagreed.

GRADE ORIENTATION

Are students more concerned with obtaining high grades than learning? Many students reported more interest in courses that result in high grades rather than learning. When asked "How likely would you be to take a course in which you would learn little or nothing but would receive an A?" 45.1% responded they would definitely or likely enroll in such a course. An additional 28.2% said they would be somewhat likely to choose such a course.

Do students expect to receive grades commensurate with their financial and personal needs rather than their academic performance? We asked students to respond to the following statement: "An instructor should take into account the grade I need in a particular course (for graduate school, financial aid, etc)." The results revealed that 23.6% of the sample agreed with the statement, 28% were "unsure" and 48.2% of the students disagreed.

RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

To what extent do students take responsibility for their attentiveness in the classroom? To assess this area we asked students to respond to the following statement: "It is an instructor's responsibility to keep me attentive in class." Fifty-three percent of students hold faculty responsible for their attentiveness. Another 14% reported being "unsure."

ACADEMIC WORK ETHIC

Traditionally, it is expected that students devote two hours of study time per week for each credit hour. Therefore, a student enrolled in twelve credit hours would be expected to devote twenty-four hours per week outside of class to reading, homework, and preparation. Despite being enrolled (on average) for nearly 13 credit hours per semester, over a third

(37.7%) of the students reported studying five or fewer hours a week. In addition, more than two-thirds (69.6%) of the respondents spend 10 or fewer hours per week on their academic work. Interestingly, when we asked our respondents if there was a type of student(s) they wished they were more like, 59.7% (of those who responded "yes" to the item) expressed a desire to be more like the students "who are most concerned about studying" and "keeping up with course work ..." This finding is an indication that, at least on some level, students wish they had a greater commitment to their studies.

THE CUSTOMER-STUDENT

Our findings from a survey of undergraduates at a public university, not unlike Bridgewater State College, buttress arguments concerning student consumerism in higher education. The results support the characterization of an undergraduate student culture that subscribes to the idea that higher education is a consumer driven market place. This may be most vividly demonstrated from the finding that over 42% of our sample believe that their payment of tuition "entitles" them to a degree. While one might argue that nearly as many (35.8%) do not feel "entitled," the fact that four out of ten respondents do feel "entitled" is indicative of a marketplace ethos that fosters a demanding, consumerist attitude.

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE (N = 195)

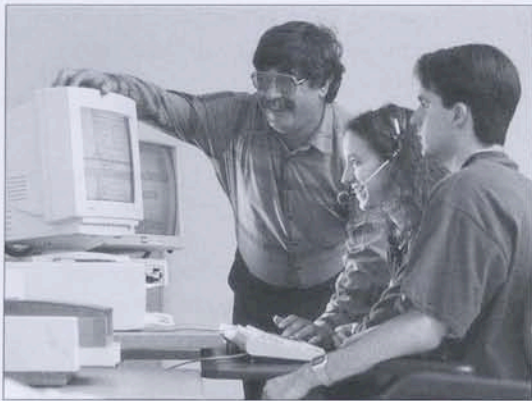
CHARACTERISTIC

Age (Mean)	23.8 years
Percent Female	66.2%
Percent Nonwhite	29.9%
Median Parental Income	75,000
Credit Hours (Mean)	12.9
Most Common Course Grade	C+/B-
Percent Study <=10 Hours per Week	69.6

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS REPORTING AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE STATEMENTS:

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	PERCENT
If I'm paying for my college education, I'm entitled to a degree.	42.5
I would take a course in which I would be required to do very little work but would receive an A.	73.3
An instructor should take into account the grade I need in a particular course (for graduate school, financial aid, etc.).	23.6
It is the instructor's responsibility to keep me attentive in class.	52.6



"Grade grubbing," in which students seek high grades for minimum effort, is often cited as a symptom of the consumer orientation of contemporary college students. Our respondents appear to embrace this attitude. Nearly three-quarters (73.3%) of the sample indicated that they would ("definitely," "likely," or "somewhat likely") enroll in a course that resulted in little or no learning if they were assured of an "A" grade.

Our second item on grades revealed that almost a quarter (23.6%) of respondents expect faculty to consider nonacademic criteria (e.g., financial and personal needs) in the assignment of grades. Consequently, when students do not receive the grade they are looking for, they are apt to simply demand it. Bellah's anecdote of students arguing with faculty over grades with the refrain "I'm paying for this course," characterizes this attitude.

A majority (53%) of respondents hold faculty responsible for their attentiveness in class. Why? Critics of consumerism contend that students expect to be entertained and protected in the classroom, rather than challenged. At home, if students do not appreciate the information they view on television, they can change the channel. While many college students (or their parents) pay a monthly fee for cable television, most pay considerably more for college tuition. Therefore, one would expect students to demand a level of "entertainment" from faculty commensurate

with the price of tuition. Bellah relates a story of a student in the Stanford Business School who "shouted at an able young sociology instructor, 'I didn't pay \$40,000 to listen to this bullshit,' and then walked out of the class." From a consumerist perspective, the student's action is logical. As Bellah describes it, the student believed that, for \$40,000, he deserved an instructor who would keep him entertained with information he found pleasing. In this environment, students balk at accepting the authority of either their instructors or the institution they attend.

The responses to our survey item on student study time are consistent with figures reported by the Higher Education Research Institute that found only 32% of first-year college students nationally spent at least six hours per week studying or doing homework, down from 44% in 1987. Our respondents reveal a lack of commitment to learning for its own sake. Moreover, students' preoccupation with grades and minimal investment in studying, together with their self-reported most common course grade (C+ \ B-), suggest that many students are able to attain a college degree while putting forth minimal effort.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO CUSTOMER-STUDENTS

Clearly, any conclusions based upon the findings of this study must be qualified by the limitations of the data. This project was conducted at a single institution, which may preclude generalizations to other undergraduate colleges and universities. Nevertheless, the results highlight some of the challenges facing higher education faculty and administrators in the 21st century.

Colleges and universities can do little to lessen the impact of customer driven culture on students prior to their entry into higher education. However, institutions can do much to instill motivation and intellectual curiosity once students arrive on campus. While our data reveal much about students' consumerist approach to higher education, one finding suggests that students want to dedicate themselves more fully to

their academic work. When we asked respondents if there was a type of student(s) they wished they were more like, a majority expressed a desire to be more like peers "who are most concerned about studying" and "keeping up with course work..." This result is an indication that, at least on some level, many of our students wished they took their studies more seriously.

High faculty expectations of students and student accountability to reasonable standards will do much to improve the work habits and desire for knowledge of many students. In order to strive toward this seemingly obvious



goal, faculty must be protected (by colleagues and administrators) from student consumer backlash in the form of low teaching evaluations for rebuffing "grade grubbers" and demanding high quality work. Anthony Greenwald and Gerald Gillmore's research on student evaluations of teaching led them to conclude that "If an instructor varied nothing between two course offerings other than grading policy, higher ratings would be expected in the more leniently graded course." Greenwald and Gillmore suggest institutions that use student evaluations to judge teaching ability take grading leniency into consideration when determining the effectiveness of faculty.

Ironically, many colleges and universities use evaluation forms that read more like customer/student-satisfaction surveys than assessments of teaching ability. Paul Trout has suggested that instead of “asking students to rate the professor’s ‘stimulation of interest,’ ‘concern for students,’ and ‘impartiality in grading’—categories that allow disgruntled students to make piñatas of their professors—evaluation forms should ask whether the course was demanding, whether performance standards were high, whether the workload was challenging, whether the grading was tough, whether the students learned a lot”. Indeed, how can college educators expect students to respect both learning and the professors who teach them when they are asked to rate their instructors as one would evaluate the staff of a resort hotel?

Colleges and universities today must actively create and re-create cultures that reflect the value of higher education. In order to do this, the expectations for students and evaluations of faculty must reflect a belief system that honors and supports both learning and teaching. What better way to encourage students to become more like their learning-oriented peers than to provide them with high performance standards, a workload that is challenging, and a grading system that holds them accountable for their own learning?

The New York Times recently reported that market forces had begun to influence the academic standards of one of the nation’s more prestigious institutions: the undergraduate program at the University of Chicago. Long a bastion of academic rigor, the university, in response to students’ and parents’ expectations, plans to reduce its core curriculum and expand its recreation and service areas. Hugo F. Sonnenschein, the University’s president is quoted as saying: “The commodification and marketing of higher education are unmistakable

today, and we can’t jolly dance along and not pay attention to them. One hears constantly from parents and students: ‘We are the consumer. We pay the tuition.’”

In terms of strict market logic, the desire (by administrators such as those at the University of Chicago) to please the student-customer is rational. The model of an economic transaction starts from a fixed preference in the mind of the consumer, who simply shops for the best way to fulfill that preference. Therefore, if colleges and universities are simply supplying a product, shouldn’t the consumer be sovereign? No! While material objects such as dormitories and student centers may be made more “customer friendly” the classroom should not be judged by such standards. The teacher-student relationship is not intrinsically an economic one. There can be no fixed preference in advance, because learning is an essentially creative and unpredictable process. Teachers are not mere transmitters of predigested information. There are no algorithms for teaching how to think about and act with information. Professors must have the freedom and authority necessary to motivate students to learn rather than merely focus on being entertained and receiving what they consider to be an acceptable grade. Grade inflation, poor study habits, and consumer-oriented faculty evaluation forms all work against this goal.

Colleges and universities cannot escape our increasingly consumer oriented culture. They can, however, make it clear that students, the “customers” of higher learning, are not always “right” and actually must learn from their professors in order to receive their college degrees. In order to do so, faculty must have the power and respect to withstand the potential hostility of displeased students who are merely out for entertainment and an easy A.

While the idea of meeting our students’ needs is consistent with a customer-service approach to higher education, it is pedagogically suspect.

Learning inevitably induces an ambivalent mix of emotions, in which frustration is as prominent as pleasure. A “folk wisdom” of the market—that the customer is always right—is often pedagogically irresponsible. Equating good teaching with a widespread feeling among students that you have met their consumerist expectations ignores the dynamics of teaching and prevents significant learning. As Samuel Hazo describes the situation, “educators in such circumstances do not educate but serve the students.”

Higher education cannot ignore our increasingly consumer oriented culture. It must not, however, succumb to all that traditionally comes with this culture in the world of business and marketing. If colleges are to retain their *raison d’être*, institutions of higher learning must grant degrees based primarily on learning rather than tuition checks. In order to do this, colleges and universities have to make it clear that students, today’s so-called “customers” of higher learning, are not always correct. This will only be possible if faculty at these schools have the power and respect to withstand the potential hostility of displeased students who go to college with the primary intention of buying a good time and a degree.

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