

# Quality Customer Service-Student Retention and Institutional Viability

By **Lawrence N. Smith, Executive Editor**

This month's features articles are about customer service. The point of view each embraces is that there is direct correlation between the quality of service delivered and the value the institution places on its students. There is also an underlying assumption that students are learners as well as consumers.

Over the past years there has been considerable discussion as to whether or not we should use the term customer when referring to our students. Those who feel we should not, state its use is a pejoration of the college experience and traditional institutional values. They believe it connotes a devaluing of the important, traditional inspirational and mentoring roles faculty play in the lives of their students. Implicit in their concern is also the fear that by using the term customer, faculty might be seen as merely vendors of learning and be subjected to the ever-changing fads and demands of the market place.

Colleges and universities have changed over the recent years, as have all institutions in American society. Demands on the academy for accountability, unionization of faculty, staff, and even graduate students, college-business partnerships, contract learning, faculty entrepreneurial ventures with institutional acknowledgement and support, have all altered the educational landscape. Also important has been the impact of demographics. Only 17 come to college not only in search of degrees, but to acquire problem-solving learning and for help in retooling their skills for career changes. They attend daytime and at night, full time and part time, on campus and off site as well learn via the Internet. For them quality of service is a major determinant of college choice.

Quality customer service is a legitimate focus for our colleges and universities. It defines the value we place on those we invite to our institution as visitors or students as well as on our employees (faculty, administrators, staff and even student workers). How well we are treated shapes our day. Frustrations over inadequate parking, red tape, late paychecks, rudeness, mistakes in processing information, waiting in line and misinformation are the results of poor service. When our expectations are not met, we demand better service, we complain to our fellow students or colleagues; our moods related to learning or working are affected. We feel devalued and unimportant; deep down resentment begins to build.

Ironically, delivering outstanding, high quality service is within or immediate control. More than anything else, it is a reflection of an institution's value orientation about the worth of people. Of course, recognition and incentives for delivering great service are nice and inspire some. But in the best of institutions and situations, the intrinsic satisfaction resulting from helping someone else, for making a positive difference in their life, is the best and most important reward of all.

Several years ago there appeared in *Change* magazine an outstanding article written by Robert Zemsky and William Massy titled "Toward an Understanding of Our Current

Predicaments." They described the capacity for innovation in higher education at risk as a result of the resistance to change in our colleges and universities. Their closing comments are worth including here.

"What has changed is not just the public's mood, but its willingness to support institutions that allocate goods rather than serve customers and that value producers more than products. To survive and prosper in an age of enterprise colleges and universities will have to be more responsive to the changing market for research and learning, more willing to make service their marks of quality, and more successful in differentiating among separate functions like teaching and research. That said, the fact that it alone can confer legitimacy and standing in the scholarly community. How it uses that power and whether it is willing to adapt to changed circumstances will determine the nature of American higher education over the next half-century." \*

We live at a time when the educational franchise has been seen as an entrepreneurial opportunity for exploitation. Whether we like it or not it, our hegemony has been eroded and will continue to be so as we try to hold on to the past. Today's students are not bothered by being seen as customers, what they are bothered by is poor service. Convenience of location and time and ease of parking are more important to many than the cost of tuition and fees. That we are well established, have impressive campus facilities and traditions or famous alumni gives way to the competition when they move into our sphere of influence, offering programs and degrees that our students really want coupled with outstanding service and instructional delivery.

*\*Change v27 n6 p40-49 Nov-Dec 1995*