Are Students Customers, or Not?

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Many faculty take it as a basic truth of the university that students are not customers. Recently, the George Mason University Faculty Senate passed a resolution officially stating that it is inappropriate to regard students as customers. I asked the students in one of my classes to comment on the Faculty Senate's argument. None of them agreed. To them it is plain and simple: they are customers. Their biggest complaint is that the faculty appear to set up class schedules for their own convenience and ignore the needs of their customers. Consequently many of them cannot graduate when they expected. It seems to me that this is a serious disconnect between the faculty and students, which will only grow worse as the budget shortfall forces cancellations of classes.

Faculty Senate Statement

> "Corporate models" of education in which students are viewed as "customers" are not appropriate. Education is a unique activity in a democratic society that differs markedly from both business and government. Universities are absolutely essential in contemporary society as centers of free inquiry, free expression, open discovery, and dissent. Any attempt to force education into a corporatist mold devalues faculty, lowers academic standards, and harms both students and the institution itself. (GMU Faculty Senate, September 2002)

Commentary

The Faculty Senate is right, of course, that the university cannot operate like a corporation. Most universities receive the bulk of their funds from state legislatures, who base their payments on enrollment head-counts. Were the university to provide what the students value most -- smaller classes, more attention from professors, more challenging assignments, more individual coaching and guidance, more training in workplace effectiveness -- it would not be able to sustain enrollments. But even granting the constraints and freedoms of a university, this statement shows no sense of awareness of student concerns. While free inquiry, free expression, open discovery, and dissent may be priorities for faculty, they are not uppermost on most students' minds. Finally, it is not clear that the Faculty Senate's statement represents the actual sentiments of most faculty. Many faculty do in fact take their responsibilities as teachers very seriously and do their best to respond to their students within the constraints imposed by crowded classes and faculty senates. How can students learn to listen for how their work will affect other people in an atmosphere that officially despises the very notion of customer?

I asked my students to send me commentaries with their reactions to this statement. To a person, they rejected the Faculty Senate's argument that they are not customers. They tried to understand why the Faculty Senate might have reached such a conclusion, but in the end they concluded that it does not apply at a public-supported university. Here are their exact words.

Student 1

> While I sympathized with faculty who would not want to stoop to the level of a performer in their relationship with students, it is obvious that students are customers who become involved in action loops with faculty for a number of years. They pay.
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> I can understand objections from the faculty. Here's a list of objections to the notion that students are customers.
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> 1. Students are not the only paying customers. The state funds the university. The university is supported by research grants.
> 2. Services are delivered to a mass of students, thus their performance is not easily tailored to them as individuals (including their schedules).
> 3. Saying a student is a "customer" implies they have a moral authority to tell the university what to do. This cannot be because it is the university professors, not the students, who know how to teach.
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> The scheduling example gives more complex feelings than mere professional attitude because it affects the teacher's personal lifestyle. This adds three additional objections:
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> 4. Professors have accepted a certain lifestyle upon accepting a post. Perhaps they have chosen it to explore their academic interests, perhaps to help students learn. In either case, they likely choose this knowing they would have to deal with university budget constraints, a (perhaps) small paycheck, and the possibility of dealing with a percentage of students who are disinterested. With such cons to live with, a faculty member might object to any loss of control that tips the scale of pros and cons and further diminishes their status symbol of the respect they deserve.
> 5. Coming into the job, part of the mode of operation was the scheduling negotiation prerogative of the faculty over the students'. This can be inferred as part of the agreement (kind of perk) of working at the university. By asking them to give up the perk, it can seem like you are reneging the original terms of employment.
> 6. Scheduling involves rearranging one's personal life. A professional should not be asked to sacrifice so much.

All but the last point I can dismiss as ego issues. Still, it is obvious that scheduling to the goals of the students will help the students. On a professional level, the effectiveness of scheduling to first service the students is a wonderful and straightforward realization. The only problem is that teachers are people, too, and the schedule affects their personal life, not just their professional life.

Whether I agree with a teacher with regard to priorities of his personal life versus his professional life, as a student, it doesn't matter. I want that teacher to provide for me as much as possible. Period.

When I see cracks on the surface of professionalism, even though I might empathize with the teacher when I consider the circumstances, I am narrow-minded enough to feel like some kind of pawn in the throws of a giant imperfect capitalistic society that only cares as much for me as I am directly worth to them. Is this what I go to school to learn? I'm sure that even though it's not required curriculum, it has definitely been taught.

Student 2

Students are the customers to the university for one simple reason: they provide the money necessary for the functioning of the university. Tuition is what allows a university to train and educate, as well as research. This is why classes should be taught based on student schedules, not faculty schedules. If most students at the university have full time jobs, then classes should be scheduled at night. It does no good offering classes that no one can take because of prior obligations. Similarly, it does no good to have a path to graduation (with certain required classes) if the students can never take those required classes. However, the faculty do have a valid point: faculty should determine curriculum. Students must rely on the experience of faculty to know what is needed to be learned so that students are ready for the "real world." To me, faculty that talk as if I am not their customer come off as slightly snobbish.

Student 3

I feel that students should be treated more like customers within limits. I would not favor students setting curriculum or mandating requirements for degree programs. However, clearly students pay the bills that allow universities to exist. As such, I believe that universities should be responsive to students needs regarding scheduling within the faculty set curriculum. Additionally, I feel that business and society in general should be thought of as the customer of a university. In this respect, universities' failure to understand he needs of business and society detracts from the educational experience.

Some professors are unwilling to accommodate the needs of students as customer. When I deal with such inflexible faculty, I feel slighted. I feel that they are missing the point of the university. Specifically, that point is

fulfilling the educational needs of students and preparing students to meet the needs of business and the larger society.

Student 4

Students are customers in that they pay tuition to obtain knowledge. I believe that the customer model is not entirely inappropriate for the university. A student does pay tuition, however, if the professor is to be expected to deliver knowledge to the student, the professor must also be a customer, receiving feedback from the student, and obtaining enough information from them to be able to gauge whether the student has learned something or not.

Student 5

Students are most *definitely* customers. We pay don't we? And isn't that one of the definitions of a customer: "Someone who pays for a service"? We pay the university for the service of teaching classes, so we can attend the classes and earn a degree. That made me angry to read the faculty argument that students are not customers. Faculty are not customers, they are employees by anyone's definition, and they are **paid to teach us**. Employees are alwasy paid to satisfy the customers, not satisfy themselves. They are not paid to teach when *they* want, they are paid to teach when *we* want. Faculty should be given some degree of consideration as to schedule, but only secondary to students. Word spreads, especially on faculty quality, and students (translated: customers) will simply take their business elsewhere if they want to. When talking with co-workers who are also students, the first question asked is "how much do you pay?" The second question asked is "how do you like the faculty?" Faculty who think in this manner always seem to strike me as unprofessional, and that they would rather be doing research than teaching.

Student 6

I believe that students are indeed customers and professors are performers, but their relationship is indirect because it functions though an intermediate entity, which is the university itself. Also, groups other than students could also be thought of as customers. Local businesses which depend on the skills taught in the universities might be one example. Some of these businesses might invest money in the university or provide scholarship money to students to help meet the demands of their respective industries. Many professors therefore likely feel that they have responsibilities to satisfy not only the desires of the students, but also the demands of related industries and the integrity of their fields of expertise.

That said, I believe that the customer model can be appropriate for the university setting, provided that all customers are taken into account: the students, the professional and academic organizations of the field of study, the related industries, and even the taxpayers who subsidize the university.

So it becomes the responsibility of the professor to create a good learning atmosphere for his or her students, but it is not his or her responsibility to meet the requests of students who simply wish to minimize their workloads and maximize their grade point averages. If the professor met this request, I believe he or she would be breaking the action loop with the other customers mentioned above.

Student 7

I think the students ARE the customers of the university. They follow the basic rule of customer/provider. The students pay money in order to buy education. Failure to provide them with that service in a satisfactory manner is a failure to fulfill the faculty's part of the contract. Students will also act like customers and will not recommend this provider to other potential future customers. Another aspect where students act as customer is in the fact that they can stop the service at any point and continue their business elsewhere. I do not accept the faculty's argument. The universities today have changed their original sole definition. Originally the universities were a research function. The sole reason they practiced education was in order to train their future researchers. Today the major functionality of the universities is to provide a higher education training service to the general public (for many usages -- work market, pleasure, and others). The universities charge the public for that service and failing to acknowledge that the students are its customers is a hypocritical game of taking money and not returning the service that money bought. As for my feelings when interacting with faculty members that don't consider me their client, let's just say that I feel very bad. I feel angry and betrayed. I also feel hurt and that my desires and needs are ignored.

Student 8

Students are customers as they are looking towards getting a good education from the school they attend and hopefully gain knowledge that would help them get a good career. I don't completely agree with the faculty's argument. I feel that even though there are students who don't care for proper education and are just looking to graduate without gaining knowledge, there are still those who care deeply about the information and knowledge they attain at college besides the piece of paper that proves your graduation. I would not like if the faculty;' interaction with the students was due to their interpretation because it would be considered generalization or stereotyping on behalf of college students. I think the faculty must fulfill their job and duties for which they are being paid. It would only be considered ethical if they are loyal to their students.

Student 9

Students are customers because they pay for their education. They are here to gain something, by learning and obtaining a degree. The student has a contract between the faculty that the faculty must teach something to the

student and the student should be able to learn from the faculty. I do not accept the faculty argument since the students should be considered customers. I am a student so I see the viewpoint of the students and it is more difficult for me to see the faculty's viewpoint. When I interact with professors that have this interpretation, I feel as if I am not taken seriously or importantly. I feel that I am not on their level.

Student 10

In a university setting, students are customers in that they require the conferral of a degree within a certain timeframe (usually four years) and the university implicitly agrees to this contract via the design of a curriculum that can be completed in such a timeframe. This is not the case at some universities, and I believe that this is the basis for the argument that students are not customers of the university. For instance, at major research universities, a good deal of funding is based on research discoveries made by professors, and thus a good deal of time must be focused solely on research, as proposed to teaching. I can understand this attitude, and in fact most universities of this kind actively encourage students to participate in such research and thus gain education that way. However, at a school such as George Mason (which is not primarily a research university in the eyes of the government, to my knowledge), the focus should be on students as customers. I resent faculty who in this setting, where research is not the primary goal, hold that I am not a customer. I feel that I have paid tuition, have done my best and might not graduate in four years due to a professor's unwillingness to instruct at hours that aren't convenient to him or her. This shows disrespect toward the needs of the students as customers and therefore causes me as a student to lose loyalty toward the university and to seek education elsewhere.