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The Importance of Campus Customer Service to Enrollment and Retention

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Student Success Toolkit
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About Student Success Toolkits

The Student Success Toolkits from Trellis Strategies provide evidence-based recommendations for colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. The toolkits summarize the latest research in student success and outline practical steps for administrators and practitioners.

About Trellis Strategies

We are a strategic research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

About the Author

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Kaleigh Salty is a research analyst with interdisciplinary experience in pedagogy and statistical physics. She developed an interest in teaching and learning working as a tutor and lab instructor at Texas State University, where she completed a B.Sc. in Physics, with minors in Anthropology, History, and Applied Math. As a non-traditional, neurodivergent student, she has become deeply curious about learning processes and metacognition, especially as it relates to the role of non-academic factors in academic performance. More broadly, she aims, through qualitative and mixed methods, to shed light on how HEIs can evolve to better accommodate students with atypical learning styles and life experiences, and in turn, improve higher education quality and access.

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Customer service matters for enrollment and retention.

The way students view higher education has changed since the mid 20th century. With the rising cost of tuition over the last several decades, students are making harder choices about higher education versus other life options. Demographics are also an issue, as there are lower numbers of traditional-age students entering the higher education pathway. When looking to improve enrollment, retention and graduation rates, institutions should employ customer service principles to help make the choice to enroll and persist easier for students. In the past, customer service may not have been important to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), largely due to a tradition of viewing higher education as a personal pursuit rather than a service. Plus, costs were lower, and the population of students was abundant. The current variables in higher education – higher costs and changing demographics – require institutions to re-focus the lens by which they view the student relationship. Managing a stable (or growing) student enrollment is an essential economic and quality issue for institutions.¹

Giving students a good education in a mentoring environment has a long and successful history in higher education. Yet calling students customers – and treating

them as customers – does not. How can students be recontextualized as consumers without losing the give-and-take nature of the student-institution relationship?

Though it may be a new idea for faculty and staff accustomed to viewing education from a personal pursuit or personal growth perspective², the reality is that higher education is similar to other service organization that must manage their “product” as a series of interactions that make sense to the end-user. Healthcare is another industry with a similar challenge.³

The ways colleges interact with students in small, everyday encounters significantly impacts enrollment and retention, and measuring these interactions to ensure the highest quality is key in not only improving short-term goals like retention outcomes but can also go a long way toward creating brand recognition, and long-term loyalty. The good news is that there are existing models for how to provide customer service without compromising the nature of the relationship or the quality of the offering.^{4,5}

Key recommendations



Understand that students are consumers. Education is an investment and HEIs are client-based service providers.



Create a culture of customer service based on values, communicated consistently to administrative and academic personnel.



Train, manage, and measure campus customer service.



Leaders should exemplify every aspect of customer service. Leadership engagement is crucial to enacting lasting cultural shifts to be a consumer-oriented institution.



Customer service is a choice; it's intentional.

American higher education does not have a strong track record with customer service. In one study from the *Journal of Business*, authors Amy Rummel and Maeghen L. MacDonald note that, "The ability for [students] to be able to interact with personnel who treat them with respect, are courteous, show true concern for the students' well-being and have the answers would have significant impact on their satisfaction as these results indicate. Sending students to a variety of campus units at various locations due to a lack of staff knowledge is detrimental."⁶

Further to this problem, a study by Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse in 2021 found that many students don't ask for the help they need: "Just 21 percent of respondents say they have spoken up about a campus issue that was important to them – with many saying they did not anticipate officials would act on the concern."⁷

There may be several reasons colleges are behind other industries in customer service culture and practices.

First, demand for higher education increased every year from 1945-2010. Many colleges were enrolling and teaching as fast as they could. Customer service was an afterthought.

Second, because the "product" of colleges (education) is such a rare and specialized offering, colleges may have concluded (consciously or not) that great teaching is sufficient to define the relationship between the college and the student.

Colleges have mostly viewed students as constituents, similar to the way governments view citizens within their purview of service. Governments are obliged to serve their constituents, but constituents generally cannot choose alternatives.

Students, though, can choose alternatives. They can fail to enroll, stop out, or transfer out. They can vote with their feet. As authors Oscar W. DeShields Jr, Ali Kara, and Erdener Kaynak write in *The Emerald Research Register*: "As in the case of customers for commercial institutions, student retention may be linked to customer satisfaction. Even though one might hesitate to call students 'customers' because of the student teacher relationship, this still does not change the fact that without students, there would be no need for colleges, which means not only a drop in tuition revenues, but also that colleges would no longer have clients to receive the classes, counseling, and other services that they were established to provide."⁸



Creating intentional relationships helps retain students.

Customer service doesn't just "happen" because employees are well-intentioned.

College leaders must declare, train, manage, and measure customer service. They also need to understand that many of the offerings of their colleges are interchangeable with other colleges and aren't enough in and of themselves to attract students. All colleges offer courses with qualified faculty, have recreation rooms, student affairs officials, and claim strong "family-style" service.

The real test for college customer service is: do students understand how to navigate college processes (or better yet – not even notice them) and receive consistent treatment every day, without being required to navigate and de-mystify the college experience for themselves?

There are many ways to frame customer service for college employees. The most sustainable approach is to explain customer services in terms of values, not prescriptions. Customer service is about creating a relationship of trust and reliability between the student and the college.



Customer service is multifaceted.

Throughout the student lifecycle, students interact with different facets of an institution. Prior to attending, students go through the application process, which depending on the student, typically includes financial aid. Upon acceptance, they register for classes which may consist of meeting with an academic advisor to discuss their degree plan and scheduling options. For new students this may include attending freshman orientation, where they can familiarize themselves with campus facilities like housing, athletics centers, library services, student services, etc. Once the term begins, students are introduced to faculty and teaching assistants, perhaps departmental staff whose focus is solely on one academic discipline. Each of these steps represents an opportunity to shape that student’s experience and instill in them a sense that they are valued by the institution. This need not come at a cost to academic excellence and achievement. The students are not paying for their grades, but their participation can be fostered by an accumulation of positive interactions throughout the student life cycle.⁹

With something so complex, how can student experience be measured and improved? Institutions can take several initiatives to ensure that most interactions are as positive as possible.

First and foremost, set expectations with students. Explain what you offer (and in some cases, what you don’t). Students will mostly judge customer service by what they expect. Make sure to set those expectations as a first step.

After establishing expectations, make sure you are living up to the expectations you set. Do this by paying close attention to student experience. How do the students perceive certain interactions and where do these interactions take place? What are the campus trends? There are few frameworks that can be adapted to the landscape of higher education to get a sense of where to allocate resources to improve customer service and where those resources can be allocated from.¹⁰

The SERVQUAL model, is one well-known customer service framework that can be useful because it can be easily adapted for specific industries. It assesses service quality in terms of customer expectation and perception of five key dimensions of the customer experience: 1) reliability, 2) tangibility, 3) assurance, 4) responsiveness, and 5) empathy.



5 Key Dimensions of Customer Experience

- 1 **RELIABILITY** refers to the capability of the service organization to provide the promised service consistently. This is something that can be further adapted based on service concentration. For instance, if library services are being offered, the availability of printers and reliable WIFI may be things a student could reasonably expect from a university library, in addition to books, journals, and references.
- 2 **RESPONSIVENESS** refers to the organization showing enthusiasm to support the consumer and transparency of communication.
- 3 **EMPATHY** refers to the attunement to a consumer’s needs, as well as compassion and courtesy extended by the organization.
- 4 **TANGIBILITY** refers to the physical indicators of an organization. For example, access to sports facilities or an on-campus gym, dining facilities, or parking.
- 5 **ASSURANCE** refers to the aptitude and skill of the organization’s employees to provide the promised service. Again, this is something that should be narrowed down based on service area, as the promised service of faculty and professors are not going to have the same locus as that of administrative staff.

Research indicates that the service aspects most prioritized by consumers are those of reliability and responsiveness, with empathy, tangibility, and assurance exhibiting variability in importance to consumers. In higher education, existing studies show that students follow this same pattern and thus, allocating resources to improve reliability, responsiveness and the other values may be a good starting point in improving customer service and promoting a more consumer oriented professional culture.

About the SERVQUAL Model

In the SERVQUAL model, customer perception is defined as, "how an individual sees something, in other words, how they select, organize, and interpret information." Expectation is similarly defined to be, "awareness of service quality [a consumer] wish[es] to receive and what they believe an institution to be reasonably capable of delivering." The survey instrument derived from this framework measures a customer's expectations prior to receiving a product or service and their perceptions of the performance by the provider after the product has been delivered or service has been completed.

The survey itself is highly adaptable to suit unique factors and distinctions that accompany service delivery in different industries. It can also be altered to focus more on measuring either expectation or perception independently. One such survey that focuses only on service performance perceptions is SERVPERF which omits the expectations-based questions from SERVQUAL and was developed to adequately measure customer satisfaction and perceptions of quality regardless of industry. Finally, more recent adaptations of the SERVQUAL model have evolved to

factor in consumer expectations as it relates to consumer investment or involvement, where industries that are service based tend to require more consumer involvement than product-based industries do, which understandably influences their expectations and perceptions. Higher education requires both consumer involvement and investment from a student: a student must be involved in their academic experience to get good grades and get the most out of their class/instructor interactions and a student must invest money in order to attend college.

Currently, the SERVQUAL instrument has been implemented for both administration and faculty at institutions throughout the United States, such as the Student Satisfaction Index (SSI), adapted from the European Customer Satisfaction Index, which was itself adapted from SERVQUAL, and the Quality of Instructor Service to Students (QISS) Questionnaire, examining student-faculty outcomes specifically.

SERVQUAL has also been expanded in some research to investigate an institution's (in a few studies, a department's) brand or image. Image refers to, "the kind of associations students get from an organization's products or services," and has been adjusted to the landscape of higher education to include such dimensions as, "having contributions to society," "adding prestige to a student's resume or reputation," and "employer recognition." While this may be more abstract a facet of customer service, the image of a university can be crucial in attracting new students. However, prestige for most students tends to be less of a priority in the current job market and most students are not angling to attend institutions with an ivy league reputation. This means more practical elements like reliability and responsiveness can improve an institution's profile and ensure a positive student experience.

Where to start?



Follow these five simple steps to start creating a customer service culture on the campus.

1

Top leaders should announce that customer service as a priority.

Effective customer service begins with the leadership's acknowledgment of its significance. Leaders should consistently emphasize the importance of service and actively engage in discussions about it. Demonstrating a commitment to service on a personal level is equally crucial. Leaders need to extend excellent service to everyone – students, parents, as well as their own staff and faculty. The example set by leaders plays a pivotal role in establishing a culture of customer service on campus.

2

Train the employees.

Once leaders declare the importance of customer service, it's time to offer training to faculty and staff to learn what great service is and how to deliver it. A values-based approach to customer service is best for an academic environment, because it keeps the value of the relationship front-and-center. Trellis Strategies has delivered training to thousands of college and university employees focusing on the values behind customer service, not just a list of rules.

3

Study customer service.

Now that leadership has established the priority for great service, the institution should assess where service is working and where it's not. The assessment should involve surveys and focus groups with students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Insights from these groups can identify areas for improvement.

4

Fix what needs fixing.

After assessing the customer service deficiencies, start the process of fixing those areas that need attention. Develop a simple plan and timeline to improve processes, communication, interactions with students – whatever the issues are. Hold front-line managers responsible for making the corrections and reporting on progress.

5

Measure customer service.

Measure customer service all the time. Even after fixing a few issues from step 4 above, new issues are likely to arise. Customer service must be assessed on a regular basis. This can be done through formal means such as surveys and data analysis. It can also be done through conversations. There is a lot of value in leaders talking to employees and students about what's working and what isn't and then committing to fix what isn't.

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