Retention Reconsidered…

Why Challenge must Supersede Customer Service in the Quest for Committed Students

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In a competitive academic culture in which student persistence shapes everything from public estimation of institutional quality to political influence and financial stability, every diploma represents a “job well done” for the university as well as the recipient. As a result, retention holds an increasingly prominent spot on To Do lists from board members and presidents, to professors and resident assistants. This preoccupation has served the university well by fostering a student-centered perspective in which educational leaders increasingly value student satisfaction and emphasize customer service. However, if it is not tempered and reframed within the larger educational mission, the university’s commitment to satisfying its students can threaten its ability to transform them.

We want students to arrive at graduation with the sense of triumph and achievement that marks the finish line of a marathon or the summit of a mountain climb, the attainment of something truly demanding, something worth celebrating at the moment and reliving in the future. We want them to be filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment, and to cross the stage with a posture that suggests they might just lope into an impromptu victory lap around the arena that continues in their memory and emotions for the rest of their lives.

Instead, too many of our students experience graduation as a sort of ho-hum conclusion to a long walk, a sort of heavy sigh as they flop on the sofa and fumble for the remote after a tedious day’s work. With daunting debt to repay, and more promise of challenge ahead than sense of victory behind, they view commencement as a mark of their endurance rather than a celebration of their achievement, more of a perfunctory signing-off for the college chapter of their lives than a dramatic unveiling of the new-and-improved man or woman they’ve become. Sure, they feel good to graduate, but if many of these students were to name what they were actually feeling, I am convinced the dominant emotion would be Relief rather than Pride. Though disappointed to leave recreation and relationships behind, they are genuinely glad they are done, but not particularly cognizant or enthusiastic about what they’ve done.

This is a subtle but important difference to those of us charged with building the value of the collegiate experience. People attribute value to an experience in proportion to both the benefit they’ve received and the challenge they’ve overcome. Universities have long focused on the...
“benefit-received” portion of this equation in their marketing efforts and post-graduation polling—degrees open doors and increase salaries, etc.—but what about the “challenge-overcome” portion? I believe the commitment level of our students and graduates would rise if we 1) presented more prevalent and significant challenges, and 2) called their attention regularly to the challenges they overcome.

This is counterintuitive for the institution where a customer-service ethic supersedes a human-transformation ethic. Such an institution is highly committed to identifying and removing challenges, or at least their “customers’” perceptions of those challenges because they believe that a sense of challenge is negatively correlated with a sense of satisfaction, and they desire above all else for their students to be satisfied. While satisfied students are reasonable, even laudable, products for any university to produce, committed students are the hallmarks and foundation of the most potent universities’ work. Satisfied and Committed students are not the same.

Satisfied students are static in their emotional relationship to the institution and minimally active in engaging or advancing the mission of the school. Their investment is defined by what they are compelled to do en route to their goal: finishing. Committed students, however, are emotionally and physically engaged. They are active participants in the educational process and engage themselves in advancing the university’s aims both before and after their graduation. Their investment (physically, emotionally, financially) in the university makes them co-transformers as well as the transformed, co-educators as well as the educated, and continues long after graduation distances them physically from campus.

Many institutions press to improve retention, and by this they mean to increase the percentage of their students who persist to graduation. Often they pursue this goal by identifying and systematically eliminating all barriers to persistence—processes students might find troublesome, experiences they might find uncomfortable or unappealing. Their strategies rest on the basic philosophy that students will stay if they are not given a reason to leave.

There is just enough truth in this customer service ethic to make the misdirection at its core deadly to educational leadership— not giving students a good reason to leave is not the same as giving them a compelling reason to stay. A student who persists merely because customer
service is good is like someone who is still dating you simply because they haven’t gotten a better offer yet. Their consistent presence with you belies the unresolved disposition of their will and emotions.

Similarly, students’ recurrent presence on campus each semester may lead us to assume that we have made the vital connections and they are committed to the university experience, but their lack of meaningful engagement or personal initiative as students, and their lack of connection and support as alumni reveal that they were never as “into us” as we supposed. Being “into us” is the non-negotiable prerequisite for long-term educational and institutional effectiveness. It is the commitment that transforms students from passive spectators and dispassionate subjects into engaged participants and enthusiastic initiators in the process of their own growth. It is the magic that transforms institutional transactions into interpersonal transformations, and recasts the college barrage of relationships and experiences as vital opportunities for individual definition and expression. While persistence itself remains a valued indicator to everyone from the editors of U.S. News & Report to the CFO’s of tuition-driven institutions, the fact that students are persisting is far less important than why they are persisting. Institutions that purpose to transform their participants, and concomitantly depend upon the meaningful engagement of those to be transformed, must distinguish between genuine commitment and mere persistence. They must be far more attentive to fostering students’ increasing buy-in to the educational experience than to minimizing or disguising their opportunities to buy-out.

In part, this is because the genuine opportunity to buy-out is essential to students ultimately choosing to buy-in to the life and work of the university. The kind of meaningful, lasting commitment we seek is rarely born in one momentous or discrete decision. Rather it is assembled one smaller, innocuous decision at a time, one determined choice to overcome an immediate challenge, to resist an easier path, to increase personal investment and accept real risk, after another. In this light, bringing students to these individual decision points again and again is essential to fostering their greater, more persistent commitment over time.

Of course this requires something of students and takes courage and commitment on the part of the university as well, since some students faced with the choice to buy-in or to buy-out will inevitably decide that this school, this community, this opportunity, is not for them. This possibility is inescapable. A university cannot effectively present opportunities for its students to increase their level of commitment without also risking the real possibility that they might decrease it
instead. This is the dynamic that seems to create dis-believers and antagonists everywhere there are also believers being made. But it is also the dynamic that defines an environment where mediocrity is unacceptable. An environment that effectively breeds passionate participants and advocates necessarily reveals and marginalizes disengaged spectators.

Clearly this work is not for the faint-of-heart or for the ham-handed administrator. It takes courage and skill because there is simply too much riding on the outcome. Individual development as well as institutional success hangs in the balance. The goal is not simply to cull the uncommitted-- to subject students to challenges that reveal those to be weeded out-- but rather to employ challenge effectively to move students toward greater commitment, capacity, and engagement over time.

The “foot in the door” phenomenon is a well documented and researched dynamic in social psychology. Named for a salesman’s physical act of wedging his toe in a closing door in hopes of eventually expanding both the opening and the opportunity to make a sale, this principle reminds us that commitment is built by degrees. A series of small decisions, minor choices on less significant issues, may ultimately mount up to a substantial commitment on a significant issue; a great distance covered one small step at a time.

By slow degrees here and there throughout the diverse experiences of the campus culture, institutions must ask their students “Are you for me or against me?” If a school is genuinely student-centered and learning-focused, this question is wonderfully entangled with more significant questions like “Do you have as high an opinion of yourself and of what you can become as I do?” and “Are you as committed to your growth as we are?” Every small decision to buy-in to what the university is about, to commit himself or herself again, builds up until the student persists not simply because he or she has no better option, but because he or she genuinely finds any other option second-rate.

Universities frequently invest considerable time and attention in assessing their participants’ satisfaction. However, a closer look at the instruments and methodology they employ reveals that these efforts are likely to reveal more about a participant’s immediate comfort level than their impression of the university’s contribution to their intellectual advancement, character development, cultural literacy, vocational aspiration, etc. This is because an awareness of, let alone an appreciation for, such contributions frequently depends upon perspective built over time and distance from the educational experience itself. Interestingly, this sense of perspective
does not necessarily require large amounts of either one. It takes only a couple conversations at a university Homecoming to realize that the perspective of a current senior is very different from that of someone even one or two years beyond graduation. Unfortunately, universities are usually far less active in soliciting the feedback and opinions of graduates as they move on into their lives five, ten, or twenty years beyond their university experience as they are those of the seniors lost in the whirlwind and competing priorities of both finishing and beginning.

Comfort is a dicey value to assess and emphasize in the Academy because of the nature of the educational endeavor itself. Learning and growth depend ultimately on a reasonable level of discomfort, some level of challenge that moves participants intellectually, emotionally, spiritually into new and frequently uncomfortable places. Even the most meaningful (or perhaps especially the most meaningful) learning experiences can be off-putting, uncomfortable, and initially unwelcome. Student Comfort and Student Growth are equally prized but frequently opposed ideals in a contemporary campus culture that frames the student as both customer and product.

Our attentiveness to students’ comfort speaks loudly of our regard for individuals and community, but it speaks incompletely of our commitment to higher learning. Similarly, our regard for academic rigor and effective learning reflects a commitment to genuinely transform students, but does not necessarily lead us to see students as more than mere projects and raw materials for assembly. It is in the affirmation and expression of both these ideals that we approach a holistic perspective and create a potent and collaborative learning experience.

The inherent competition between these ideals is therefore not a conflict to be eliminated as much as it is a productive tension to be explored, prized, and managed carefully for greatest effect. Failure to recognize this tension may lead educational leaders to misinterpret both the evidence and importance of their “customers’” satisfaction and to inadvertently emphasize their comfort at the expense of their development. Support is as essential as challenge in the business of education, but in the most revealing light, universities do not exist to make their participants happy, they exist to make them better.

The most difficult retention challenge for an institution today is not simply to recruit students and to create graduates, but to create both students and graduates that believe in the university and what it stands for, who value it and their experience in it (as both recipients and contributors) highly. These Believers are the men and women who invest themselves wholeheartedly in the advancement of the institution and its mission. As students, they engage...
more fully in curricular and co-curricular experiences. As graduates, they invest more meaningfully in advancing the resources and reputation of the school. Ultimately the challenge of today’s educational leaders is to remember these things when the inevitable demands for quantity compete with quality, and to pursue students’ genuine commitment when the institutional culture is too easily content with their mere presence.