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Back Talk — Customer Satisfaction is Job One

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Words and phrases like “customer satisfaction,” “accountability,” and “competing edge” are increasingly a part of the everyday parlance of higher education and they are, or will be, spoken in libraries. **Arthur Levine**, the President of Teacher’s College, Columbia University, recently noted in an issue of *Daedalus* that higher education is going to have to change to survive in the future because of changes in the expectations of students and funding agencies, changes in the faculty who must renew their focus on teaching, new forms of technology, and the rise of “private-sector competitors” (Levine, A. (1997), “How the academic profession is changing,” *Daedalus* 126, 1-20). Levine didn’t say anything about libraries and librarians changing, but we can expect to need to follow suit.

One of the major reasons Levine believes higher education will have to change is that it is no longer a growth industry. Six out of ten high school graduates already attend college. Our economy doesn’t need seven, eight or nine out of ten young people spending four to six years attending college only to return to jobs not needing that kind of training. In the past, under the guise of expanding the educational opportunities of America’s youth, expanded educational expenditures and programs have been the rule. The stagnation of the economy was blamed for the last ten years of lean and mean but Levine doesn’t believe that the good old days will return. Instead, government is going to focus on regulating higher education to insure that existing levels of support are being used wisely and that the needs of consumers are being protected. This desire to regulate is producing a domino-effect that starts with boards of trustees who want to take a more active role in the management of their universities, then to university presidents who have to demonstrate they are in control, then to provosts or academic vice-presidents who act more like CEO’s of major corporations, and “ca-chunk” — finally to the library whose domino will topple like the rest. Vendor and publisher dominoes can expect to be nudged next.

The library, the “heart,” “sacred cow,” or “black hole” of academe, depending upon your viewpoint, is going to be regulated and inspected more than ever before. Our theories and explanations for what we do, and why we do it, will be questioned and held up to public inspection.

Somehow justifying the purchase, cataloging, and servicing of books and journals that are rarely if ever used isn’t going to be as easy as it once was. The faculty, for all of their com-

plaining, have been our greatest sources of support. They know that finding a book or journal article in the library at the moment it is needed, is critical. These faculty members have each defended their own piece of library turf and we have sewn these pieces together like a patch-work quilt to form a blanket defense of our right to catalog as we choose, to pay STM publishers exorbitant prices, to multiply levels of administration, to (insert your favorite library excess). But the faculty, Levine suggests, will have less and less power in the governance of their more business-like colleges and universities.

How can we turn this all around? How can we survive? Customer satisfaction is the key issue. The enterprise that satisfies the needs of its customers gets to survive and even thrive. Those that don’t, don’t. Can college and university libraries point to higher education studies that show how libraries contribute to the overall satisfaction of college students? The two major published summaries of educational outcomes don’t give us much ammunition: Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers; Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. Neither volume refers to studies that directly demonstrate the value of libraries to undergraduate success.

Astin has twice conducted a periodic national survey of college students that analyzes student satisfaction. Surprise, libraries are not among the top three things with which students express the most satisfaction. College major courses, extracurricular activities, and opportunities to spend time discussing course work and assignments with their professors, on the other hand, are the things that students feel best about. Libraries do rank above campus rules regarding student behavior, general education requirements, and even counseling and advisement services, so all is not lost. In both of these compendiums, however, the key to student satisfaction appears to be “involvement.” Whatever involves students is likely to get their vote. Passive services and activities get little notice. Indeed, libraries are part of a research-related cluster which generates undergraduate dissatisfaction.

Therefore, the question, I believe, becomes how can we involve students in the library more than in the past, to make our services more responsive to student needs, to strengthen our ability to pass the litmus test of greater accountability. We need new ideas

or we at least need to implement clusters of old ideas that have been set aside for another day. That day has arrived. I decided to conduct my own brain-storming session and here are the results of my efforts:

1. Create student advisory committees for every department or subject served and then listen to what they have to say.
2. Volunteer selected reading rooms or areas for student programs, faculty teas, brown bag presentations, book reviews, meet new faculty sessions, etc.
3. Provide leisure reading collections in visible areas.
4. Facilitate intensive library use during exam periods, e.g., sell pizza by the slice, soft drinks, etc., instead of waging self-defeating wars with smuggled food and drink. We can win the immediate preservation battles against food and still loose the war and the support of our major customers: the students.
5. Contact every student club and organization to ask them how the library can better meet the surfing, reading, listening, viewing needs of their members.
6. Encourage student book collecting through exhibits, competitions, etc.
7. Go to a **Barnes & Noble** superstore and think imaginatively about what they have that we can copy in our libraries.
8. Increase faculty input to the collection building process. Encourage faculty input on services concerns beyond those provided by library advisory groups. We need to listen to scores of voices not just the half dozen who get assigned to be our official friends.
9. Conduct regular user satisfaction surveys of those who come to and stay away from our libraries and seek out suggestions for improvement.
10. On the basis of what we find out through the surveys, hold focus groups to discuss the findings and alternative solutions to the problems that are uncovered.

What is the bottom line of our enterprise? I believe it is bringing people and information together. To be successful, we have to be in business. To be in business, we have to satisfy the needs of our faculty and students. To satisfy their needs, we have to find what they need and then visibly meet those needs. To survive in the future, we have to be able to demonstrate that we are accountable, that we are an integral part of our sponsoring institution’s success.