

The Case for Student as Customer

With a new mind-set, colleges and universities can survive and thrive.

by
Jim B. Wallace

IN 1992, SOUTHERN POLYTECHNIC STATE University in Marietta, GA, was one of nine colleges and universities that received a five-year total quality management (TQM) grant from IBM Corp.

The purpose of the grant was to encourage research on quality and the management of quality, to include what is learned from the research in the curriculum, and to encourage the schools to change the way they operate based on what is learned from the research.

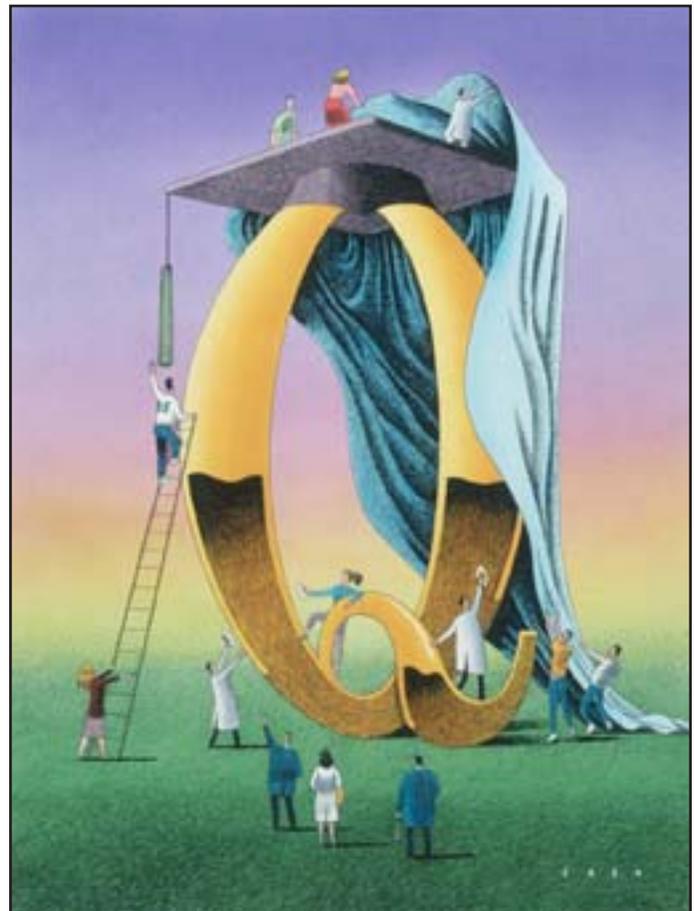
In 1993 Southern Polytechnic began an intensive study of the principles of quality and the management of quality. It invited every member of the faculty and staff to attend a 45-hour course on the principles of quality. Student leaders were also invited to attend. The purpose was to develop a common understanding of these principles by all employees, and to develop a critical mass of employees who were committed to transforming the campus to a new way of operating.

Each class was limited to 20 participants, and an attempt was made to get a broad representation of departments in each class (the university's first step in breaking down barriers between departments). The class met twice a week throughout the academic quarter.

The course, "Principles of Continual Improvement," was developed and taught by the author of this article from 1993 through 1997. To date, over 80% of Southern Polytechnic's employees have attended. In addition, it was offered as a course on principles of quality in the School of Management.

The university learned a number of things from its study, including the importance of having a shared sense of vision and mission, the importance of teamwork, the need for effective communication throughout the organization, the need for a process focus and an attitude that everything the school does can be continually improved, and the central role of the customer in everything it does.

This article is about how Southern Polytechnic came to consider the student as its primary customer, and what it means to make that customer the focus of everything it does.



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Just who is the customer?

It is fair to say that in 1993 there was consensus among faculty and staff that the university had a number of customers. The business community that hires its graduates, legislators, the citizens of Georgia, and the students were frequently mentioned. But while there was general agreement that businesses, legislators, and citizens were the customers, that was not the case with students, and few of those who considered students as customers thought they were the primary customers.

Three years later, there is general agreement among the faculty and staff that the student is the university's primary customer. That this is so can best be illustrated by taking a look at the school's draft vision (Southern Polytechnic had never developed a vision before), which was created through a yearlong campuswide collaborative process. The first words of the current draft of the vision are: "Southern Polytechnic State University will become internationally recognized for student-centered education." So, how did the school reach this conclusion?

One thing that helped is that for the past several years Southern Polytechnic has been in a period of stagnant enrollment. Most American businesses that have successfully implemented the principles of TQM (one of which is an intense focus on the customer and customer satisfaction), agree that when it comes to making a major change in the way one thinks about things, a crisis is required. For a school, declining enrollment followed by budget cuts and staff reductions causes a crisis.

People at Southern Polytechnic became receptive to consid-

Consumers also have responsibilities, and, depending on the product or service purchased, these can be quite different.

ering new ways of thinking. In this regard, colleges and universities and American businesses are in the same boat. Schools no longer operate in an environment where students have limited choices about where to attend school. Today there are more openings than there are students. Schools that don't do a good job of fulfilling the needs and wants of students simply will not survive. That is exactly the same reason American businesses are being forced to improve quality: They are no longer the only source of the goods and services people want to buy.

A December 1996 article in the *Atlanta Constitution* about a student's experiences at a local college illustrates the point about having choices.¹

To quote from the article: "College freshman Keith Nixon said he had no idea that living on campus would mean going to bed without heat, taking ice-cold showers and frequently dodging insects and rodents. Fed up with what he calls 'horrible' living conditions in the school's dormitory, Nixon is looking for a new school." Another student observed that 'I could've stayed

home with some of my friends in the projects and got the same kind of treatment.' He plans to attend a community college starting next quarter."

One thing that clearly cannot be measured, yet is one of the most fundamental issues concerning the success or failure of a business, is how many potential customers an unhappy (or a delighted) customer will talk to. In this case, Nixon's story has been broadcast throughout the entire metropolitan Atlanta area, and if the story was picked up by a wire service there is no telling how many potential students know about Nixon's plight. About five years ago this college nearly went bankrupt; it may again if the school doesn't start treating students as customers. No students, no school.

On the academic side, failure to realize that students are customers can lead to attitudes and behavior on the part of the faculty that are inappropriate. For example, a professor at a local university believed that since he was a full professor, he was entitled to show up in the classroom up to 10 minutes late (a not uncommon view among faculty, unfortunately). For a class that meets three times a week for 11 weeks, that amounts to five and a half hours of class time that the professor doesn't have to prepare for. It also means that the students are being cheated; they paid for a full class.

Customers have responsibilities, too

One of the issues that must be addressed in coming to grips with the concept of student as customer is that the student is intimately involved in the education process for a prolonged period of time. Thus the traditional argument is made that the student is a product of the college or university, not a customer.

As Southern Polytechnic continued to study what it means to be a customer, it came to the realization that it simply did not have a good operational definition of the student as customer (the same could be said of its other customers, but the difference was that at least there was general agreement that they were customers). Essentially, most colleges and universities (and many businesses) make the same mistake of assuming that "customer" is equated with "consumer."

Furthermore, most businesses don't have a good understanding of the definition of consumer as customer. It is easy to identify a customer as one who pays money for goods or services. But identifying and defining a customer are two different things. What usually gets left out of the definition of customer is the responsibilities of the customer. Consumers also have responsibilities, and, depending on the product or service purchased, these can be quite different. Consumers, students, patients, clients, and so on are all customers, but they have vastly different responsibilities.

For example, the customer who buys a car has many responsibilities. He or she must see to it that the oil is changed periodically, that routine maintenance is performed, and that the car is operated in a safe manner. Failure to fulfill these responsibilities can severely shorten the useful life of the car. Likewise, students have responsibilities to attend class, study, complete projects, take tests, and so on. How well a student fulfills these responsibilities has a significant effect on the usefulness of the education.

Once one realizes that customers have responsibilities, the



job becomes one of coming to agreement with the customers on what those responsibilities are. Often there are some standard responsibilities, but they can vary from customer to customer. Within the environment of higher education, responsibilities can vary from class to class (one may require a special project where another may not, for example) and can also vary based on what the student ultimately wants to get out of the class. The work required to get a C grade is probably different from what is required to get a B.

Of course students are also customers of housing, food services, the bookstore, and on and on. Each must define the customer, including his or her responsibilities, as well as understand what the customer expects from each supplier. Therefore it really isn't possible to have a standard operational definition of the student as customer for the school.

Eliminating barriers to learning

The concept of customers having responsibilities is one of two factors related to the bugaboo of raising or lowering standards. If students understand that they have responsibilities to fulfill in getting an education, it helps mitigate the idea that to make sure students are satisfied (i.e., get a good grade) the school will have to lower its standards.

What has often been missing is an agreement between the professor and the students regarding the responsibilities of each party. It is not enough for the professor to decide that students have certain responsibilities. They must be communicated and agreed to by the students. Furthermore, the professor must discover the wants and needs of the students and come to an agreement on which ones he or she will fulfill.

The other factor that has to do with standards is a process focus and the idea of continual improvement in the teaching/learning process. The way to help more students achieve success is not to lower the standards; rather, it is to improve the educational process and thus reduce or eliminate the barriers to learning.

For example, to get a feel for what students experience in the classroom at Southern Polytechnic, I sat in on a class for a quarter. The professor routinely projected overheads of material on which he was lecturing. The projected images were so small that I couldn't read them. I also noticed that whenever the professor would use an overhead, many students would gaze out the window or look at materials on their desk rather than look at the material being projected.

I went to the professor and told him that I couldn't read the overheads he was projecting, and suggested that he either move the projector back farther from the wall or use larger type for the material he was projecting. He told me that he had been using these overheads for more than a year, but no one had ever complained. He took my suggestion, and in the next class when the professor put up overheads, virtually all students directed their attention to the material being projected.

It was pretty clear that, through years of experience in the educational system, the students had become conditioned to being ignored whenever they complained or offered suggestions. They weren't viewed as customers. Yet here was a barrier to learning, to meeting the standards for the course, that only the professor could address; but it required open communication with his customers, the students.

There are countless examples of barriers to learning that have nothing to do with student responsibilities, but until students are

perceived as customers, little will be done to improve the teaching/learning process. To lay the entire responsibility for learning on the student is simply wrong, just as it is equally wrong to treat students as if they had no responsibilities.

One other consideration that sometimes is a factor when dealing with the issue of standards is the idea of instant gratification. Educators must help students understand that the job of a college or university isn't just about their experience while they are on campus. The job is to prepare students for long-term success both as citizens and in their chosen field of endeavor. It is the educators' job to communicate an appropriate level of expectation to the students.

What do customers need?

Another issue that came up frequently in considering whether a student is a customer was that students don't have any expertise in education. They don't know what courses they need to take or what the content of the courses should be. Therefore the assumption was that, since they don't know what they need, they can't be customers. Clearly most students don't have expertise in their field of study. A student may want to be a physicist, but he or she probably has only a dim understanding of what is involved in becoming qualified to be a physicist. That is why the student turns to a college or university for help. Many organizations simply don't grasp that the job of serving a customer is much more than simply fulfilling customer demands.

The fact is, most customers don't know what they need because they aren't the experts. One of the roles of a supplier is to provide expertise to help a customer solve his or her problem. Pneumatic tires, air conditioners, and CD players weren't developed because customers asked for them. People wanted a smoother ride, to be comfortable when it was 90 degrees outside, or to experience better sound quality.

Expertise can be a powerful competitive edge in satisfying customers. Ultimately, suppliers set the expectations of customers. Colleges with in-depth, cutting-edge expertise in a field have a real advantage in selling potential students on what they can expect to learn.

Likewise these schools can represent themselves to businesses as a source of insight into the knowledge and skills that will be important to future success (and of course inform the businesses that graduates from the school will have that knowledge and skill). The businesses could avail themselves of the university's continuing education program to keep their current employees up to speed. And because businesses are also customers, the schools should ask them what their requirements are for graduates, to ensure that their current needs are being met.

What must be realized is that students do have some expertise and some legitimate wants when it comes to the educational experience, and only if the focus is on the student as customer is it likely that these wants will be satisfied. For example, at Southern Polytechnic, about one-third of students have been in the workplace for some time and are returning to school either to complete their undergraduate degree or to study for an advanced degree.

To address their needs, the school must offer classes at night and on weekends. Admissions, the business office, and the office of financial aid are open until 7 p.m. during peak usage periods. In teaching classes, professors are sensitive to the fact that these students have already put in a full workday.



If the school didn't see these students as customers and work as a team to offer these special services to meet their needs, they might attend Southern Polytechnic, but only until another school that saw students as customers and was dedicated to satisfying them lured them away. The course content at both schools could be identical, but in today's environment, offering classes is only the price of admission to the business of education.

Southern Polytechnic has concluded that students are indeed customers—its primary customers. It reached this conclusion by understanding the following:

- The school must operationally define what is meant by student as customer.
- Customers can, and indeed almost always do, have responsibilities.
- A lack of knowledge about what they need is a common characteristic of most customers.
- If the school doesn't satisfy its customers, they will go someplace else.

Likewise these schools can represent themselves to businesses as a source of insight into the knowledge and skills that will be important to future success (and of course inform the businesses that graduates from the school will have that knowledge and skill).

Southern Polytechnic also realized that having a common vision of what it is about, working as a team with its efforts focused on the student, having clear communications among staff and with students, and continually improving everything it does are essential elements of success in this new economic age.

A change in attitude

It must be emphasized that this change in attitude did not happen overnight; however, it is a prerequisite to implementing any meaningful system for improving quality. Hiroshi Hamada, who at the time was president of Ricoh, made this point very eloquently when he spoke at the American Society for Quality's Quality Forum VII in October 1991. He said, "I think that changing human attitudes is much harder than changing methods, but that's what must be done for quality work, and it must be done over a long period, with strong belief and leadership."

Southern Polytechnic is discovering just how difficult it is to make these changes in its way of thinking and acting. Hamada and others who warn that making real progress takes a minimum of five to 10 years are right. After studying efforts to implement TQM for five years, Conference Board researchers noted that just getting employees to accept the principles of TQM takes an average of three to four years.² Southern Polytechnic has had some successes, however. Here are just a few of the formal changes that have been made:

Formation of a campuswide planning committee. This committee is responsible for developing Southern Polytechnic's strategic plan, key performance indicators, and one-, three-, and five-year goals for each indicator. Members include the president and vice president of the Student Government Association (SGA). Involving students, the customers, as partners in the planning process is a direct result of a change in the school's thinking. So is its decision to do better planning. The school has learned that doing strategic planning in a meaningful way is not easy; it is spending a lot of time learning how to plan effectively.

Expansion of the president's leadership team. This team will lead the implementation of the strategic and operational plans, and it now includes the president of the SGA on its roster. The school's president also holds weekly cabinet meetings with his vice presidents and assistants. The primary purpose of these meetings is to help break down the barriers between the various departments and identify with a common purpose.

Determination of expected learning outcomes. Southern Polytechnic is taking academic assessment very seriously. Using general education requirements as a pilot, over the last two years it has identified the major general education disciplines and associated learning outcomes, the expected results that students should be able to demonstrate, how those results will be assessed, and how identified improvements to the teaching/learning process will be implemented. This has a direct impact on the quality of the education students experience.

There are many informal changes taking place as well, as faculty and staff begin to feel empowered to make changes on their own:

- Members of the library staff have begun to offer short presentations to students on how to make more effective use of the library. In the process the staff discovered that many students couldn't remember the library's operating hours, so it began publishing hours in the student newspaper. The hours were also printed on bookmarks that students can pick up when they check out a book.
- The financial aid department revised its process to reduce the number of trips a student must make to the department to apply for and receive financial assistance. In addition, the business office, which used to be housed in a separate building, was moved to a space immediately adjacent to the financial aid department. This makes it much easier for the two departments to work together, and for the student it reduces the time spent going between the two departments.
- Members of the custodial staff "adopted" a handicapped student and provided help that made his life as a student much easier.
- An academic department embarked on a study to figure out why so many students were withdrawing from or failing a particular course so it could make appropriate changes to increase the student success rate.
- The number of days allowed for dropping or adding a course



at the beginning of the quarter was increased to ensure that most students could attend at least one class session before the end of the drop/add period.

- Some faculty members developed and taught teaching effectiveness seminars. As part of the seminar they offered techniques for getting student feedback.
- The offices of the university police were moved from a remote location on the fringe of the campus to a central location. This improves visibility and access to the department for students.

On the subject of police, the following is another example of the power of changing the school's way of thinking about things. During the first session of the "Principles of Continual Improvement" course, participants were asked to write down their current definition of quality. About midway through the course they were asked to write down their definition of quality again, to see if it had changed based on what they had learned so far. Here are the two definitions of quality written by one of the campus police sergeants:

Beginning of the course: *"To enforce the campus rules and regulations and federal and state rules in a fair and impartial manner."*

Midway through the course: *"To provide a safe, secure environment which is conducive to teaching, learning, working, and living in order for the student to fulfill their educational endeavors. To provide an active crime prevention program through education and awareness to minimize personal and state property loss."*

Obviously the first definition is job focused; the second is customer focused. And that's the point. Once you begin to see the student as a customer, your approach to the job changes. You continually look for ways to improve what you offer. You ultimately learn that "good enough" never is. Colleges and universities that see their students as customers are taking a giant step down the path toward long-term survival in this new economic age.

References

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