



2005

Campus Services: What Do Students Expect?

Frank Ardaiolo
Winthrop University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/fac_pub

Publisher Citation

"Campus Services: What Do Students Expect?" (with B. Bender and G. Roberts) in T. Miller, et al., *Promoting Reasonable Expectations: Aligning Student and Institutional Views of the College Experience*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Winthrop Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@mailbox.winthrop.edu.

Table 4.2 The “10 Best Tips” For Marketers to College Students

1. “Recognize Their Potential”: Students are serious shoppers who represent a unique and lucrative segment of the consumer populations:
 - Two-thirds (67%) have paid jobs
 - They represent \$53.9 billion in discretionary spending annually
 - They were responsible for more than \$210 billion in sales last year alone
2. “Make Them Laugh”: When asked what they want in advertisements, students name the following:
 - Humor (36%)
 - Affordable product cost (44%)
 - Everyday people (33%)
3. “Don’t Forget the ‘Rents’”: Appealing to students is important, but parental approval shouldn’t be underestimated. More than half of college students brand loyal in these categories reported they were introduced to the brand by their parents:
 - Laundry detergent (60%)
 - Bar soap (55%)
 - Toothpaste (54%)
4. “Have a Heart”: Young adults care about global and community issues. Students are more concerned with:
 - Environmental causes (56%)
 - The potential for war (53%)
 - Unemployment and lack of job opportunities (51%)
 - The rise of poverty (51%)
5. “Give Them Credit”: College students are well versed in credit usage:
 - 65% have loan payments
 - 65% have a major credit card
 - 41% of freshman have a credit card; 79% of seniors have one
6. “Think Active”: Don’t assume that today’s youth are just in class or in front of the TV. In the past year, students have been on the move, spending their money on the following:
 - Nearly \$5 billion on travel
 - \$790 million at the movies
 - \$390 million on attending music concerts
 - \$318 million at amusement parks
 - \$272 million at professional sporting events
7. “Be Connected”: College students represent one of the most connected groups:
 - 93% access the Internet in a given month
 - 56% of online students have broadband connections

- One in eight (12%) consider themselves tech leaders—they're the first to buy new electronic devices and gadgets
 - Two-thirds (67%) own cell phones, and 36% use them to access the Internet
8. "Give Them What They Want": Students are price conscious and look for a good selection:
- 93% cite low prices as important when shopping
 - 94% cite having a good selection as important when shopping
 - College students are more than twice as likely to look for sales than to want certain brands (66% versus 27%)
 - 80% shop at general purpose retailers like Wal-Mart and K-Mart
 - 54% shop at clothing retailers such as Gap or Abercrombie & Fitch
9. "Plug In": Students want the latest technology:
- 88% of college students own a computer
 - 85% own a television
 - 58% own a DVD player
 - 45% own a video game system
 - 24% own a digital camera
 - 20% of college students *intend* to purchase digital cameras, DVD players (18%), and cell phones (18%) within the next year
10. "Figure Them Out": College students are not all the same—know their differences:
- Freshman (28%) are more likely than seniors (12%) to use totally new and different brands
 - Freshman (35%) are more likely than seniors (13%) to use the same brands as their friends
 - Males are more interested than females in trying a product in a store (57% versus 48%) and in having salespeople be knowledgeable about what's cutting edge (30% versus 13%)
 - College students' favorite snack foods are candy bars, salty snacks, and chewing gum, but females are more likely than males to purchase salty snacks (71% versus 55%), chewing gum (68% versus 49%), and packaged cookies or brownies (53% versus 40%).

Chapter Five

Campus Services

What Do Students Expect?

*Frank P. Ardaiole, Barbara E. Bender,
and Gregory Roberts*

In Chapter 4, Moneta and Kuh described how student expectations for the campus environment and the culture of the community differ from their real experiences. This chapter addresses another aspect of the campus experience, the services that institutions provide to students to support their learning. Of course, there are services recognized by all as such, career services, health care, counseling service, and the like. Some other aspects of services that students expect. Student expectations of the services that will be provided by their colleges and universities are developed in myriad ways, resulting in various degrees of congruence with what actually is available. Some students develop expectations based on the experiences of their parents, siblings, or friends, while others rely on the popular press or television and movies to form impressions

about what they can expect when they attend an institution of higher education. The extent to which student expectations are accurate has an enormous influence on both student satisfaction and persistence.

While there are variations in student expectations and perceptions of their colleges, as consumers, they are consistent in their wish to have their institutions offer high-quality services in a professional manner. Beginning with the recruitment and admissions process through graduation, students expect to be treated as paying customers who receive accurate and timely information from their collegiate service providers and have access, through the institutions, to a broad spectrum of social and recreational opportunities. At the same time, students expect to be more marketable as a result of attending their colleges, able to find a job upon graduation, and eligible to be admitted to a graduate or professional school and have the appropriate academic background to succeed.

As colleges and universities grapple with enormous financial difficulties, the increasing costs of technological support, and dilapidated infrastructures, maintaining quality and “personal” student services operations is an increasing challenge. At the same time, parents are forming local and national associations to ensure that they have a strong and collective voice in their children’s college experience. The Associated Press (2003) reported in newspapers throughout the country that one organization, College Parents of America (2003), has formed to serve as an advocacy group to influence the manner in which colleges and universities develop their priorities and serve their children. Much like stockholders in a corporation, the parents view their payment of a term bill as an act of declaring their right to influence the direction of their children’s education. College Parents of America (2003) states to parents via its Web site that it is “the only national membership association dedicated to advocating on your behalf and to serving as your resource as you prepare for and put your children through college.”

The financial pressures of the continually escalating costs of college attendance have “raised the bar” for colleges and universities; students and their families expect more programs and better services. Families who have been saving for years or have assumed loans and rearranged their home budgets to pay for college expenses expect to see tangible results for their efforts. In return for the financial sacrifices that they make, students and their families expect that colleges and universities will (1) provide what they say that they will provide in promotional materials, (2) offer services and programs to make the college experience valuable and useful, (3) create opportunities to ease the transition to the world of work or graduate school, (4) and create and implement a collegiate environment that meets their perceptions of what the college experience should entail. They also expect that students will learn while in college, although it is unclear, in many sectors, what they are expected to learn.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine student expectations of the services provided for them at their colleges and universities, identify where and how there may be either misperceptions or inaccuracies, and discuss how colleges and universities can enhance the quality of the services that they provide. The authors discuss the developmental compact that colleges and universities have with their students and focus on aspects of the educational components associated with institutional service operations. In addition, the authors identify approaches for institutions to consider for developing more accurate expectations regarding student services for students and their families.

Student Expectations

The fall 2002 *Chronical of Higher Education Almanac*, “The Nation: Students, Their Attitudes and Characteristics” (The Nation, 2002), provided data gathered from incoming students at four-year colleges across the nation regarding their expectations and hopes for their college experience. Nearly 50% of first-year students reported that they applied for admission to fewer than two other institutions, and 69% of the respondents attended the institution that was their first choice. The students surveyed in this report expected to be admitted and succeed in the college that they selected.

The first-year student data included the following reasons as “very important” for students making their college selection (The Nation, 2002, p. A37):

- College has very good academic reputation (56%).
- Graduates get good jobs (51%).
- College offered financial assistance (33%).
- Graduates gain admission to top graduate and professional schools (30%).
- College has a good reputation for its social activities (27%).
- College offered merit-based scholarship (21%).
- College offered a need-based scholarship (12%).

The report (The Nation, 2002) also indicates that 57% of the respondents plan to earn at least a B average, and 20% expect to graduate with honors.

The 2002 *Chronicle* report indicated that only 49% of the respondents expected to be satisfied with college even though 76% anticipated earning bachelor’s degree. With three-quarters of the respondents having high hopes for earning a degree, but fewer than half expected to be satisfied, could it be that those who do not persist had initial low expectations that were realized upon matriculation? Or, could it be that there is a dissonance between what students expect and what institutions provide that results in student dissatisfaction?

The nature of the relationship of students with their institutions is quite complex. Students pay the bills, but institutions set the policies. Institutions enforce their regulations, while students question and sometimes complain about institutional practices and the quality of services and programs. The nexus of the contractual relationship between students and their institutions and students’ rights as consumers (Ardaiolo, 1978) presents a fascinating dynamic that continues to shape the creative tensions on campus across the country. Certainly students should be able to enjoy quality service and programs, but the nature of these services must be defined and offered within the context of the institution’s overall mission. The reality is that very few colleges and universities, if any, have the depth and resources to provide everything students expect.

What Should Colleges and Universities Provide for Students?

Contemporary students have high expectations regarding the breadth and quality of services provided by their colleges. In addition to the formal curricular offerings, and with some variations likely as a result of an institution's location, mission, or resources, most students expect their colleges to provide services and co-curricular programs including career planning and placement, recreation and athletics, student activities and social programming, services for students with disabilities, veterans affairs, financial aid, health services, international services, day care, residence life and housing, multicultural and community affairs, academic advising, registration, computer assistance, tutoring, public safety, parking and transportation, campus ministries, and psychological counseling.

In many instances, commercial guidebooks add to the increased expectations that prospective students and their families hold, even if the books are little more than advertising tools focusing on amenities rather than on academic offerings. Still, almost in self-defense, institutions have placed increasing emphasis on providing popular amenities both to "keep up with the competition" and to ensure their admission yields and student satisfaction levels. Formerly stark residence halls have been transformed to hotel-like facilities with private bedrooms, cable TV, Internet connections, appliances, and beautifully constructed recreation centers. "In general, colleges and universities have altered the ways they provide programs and services to recruit and retain students, often in response to the 'consumer sovereignty' which categorizes student-institutional relationships" (Low, 2000, p.4).

Colleges and universities generally have well-defined mission statements delineating their missions and goals that serve as the guide for determining what academic offerings, programs, and services they offer. Registration services, for example, interpret and communicate institutional academic policies to students, faculty, staff, and the general public and serve as custodians of student records within the context of the institution's mission. The quality of service that the registrar provides subsequently affects students and almost all institutional constituencies. Similarly, financial aid offices, charged with providing access and disbursement of all forms of governmental and private aid to students, have an enormous responsibility for implementing their work in an effective and efficient manner.

The extensive lists of other services enumerated are standard operations at most contemporary colleges and universities. This does not mean, however, that all institutions must provide all services. In an urban community with multiple hospitals and easy access to physicians, for example, administrators should ask whether they should maintain a costly health services program. Similarly, prudent administrators should ask whether a university located near public mental health facilities should provide comprehensive psychiatric and psychological services. The response to these issues will depend on the information institutions glean from the assessment of their programs combined with their goals enumerated in their mission statements.

Assessment and Expectations

In addition to institutionally based research and self-study practices, national studies have been undertaken to discern student expectations and institutional performance in meeting them. One comprehensive study (Low, 2000) focused on changes in student expectations and institutional performance observed in student satisfaction data over a four-year period including 1994 through

1998. The inventory used assessed student perceptions of campus experiences at 745 community, junior, and four-year public and four-year private institutions in North America and included data collected from 423,003 students. Insights gleaned from this study suggested that two-year institutions are outperforming their four-year counterparts in meeting student expectations. Four-year public and private colleges and universities exhibited stable performance, while the public institutions were maintaining a slight edge over those in the private sector. The four-year private colleges, typically the most expensive, seemed to be losing ground in meeting student expectations.

All students, regardless of the type of institution in which they were enrolled, expressed concern about the quality of academic advising offered. Student's basic personal needs, like safety and security, predominated throughout the study, offsetting concerns about more academic and institutional issues. The data suggest also that institutional responsiveness to diversity issues varies widely among institutions and for ethnic groups. There also appeared to be a mismatch between student and institutional values.

Low's study also included the focus groups to gain a more complete understanding of the underlying factors affecting student expectations and satisfaction. The major factors that emerged included the following (Low, 2000, p. 10):

- *Cost.* The higher the cost for attending an institution, the higher the expectations of its students, whether the student is paying for tuition and other costs or the institution is paying through the scholarships and other forms of financial aid.
- *Reputation.* The more selective the institution, the higher the expectations of its students and the higher levels of satisfaction. Selective institutions tend to know who they are; they have figured out what students want, need, and expect; and they have continued to receive positive feedback for their performance.
- *Value.* Students tend to value much of what the institution says it values. Thus, the greater the value articulated by the institution, the higher the expectations of its current and future students.
- *Overpromising and underdelivering.* An inability to deliver on promise made, especially those made during the recruitment process, results in inflated student expectations and lowered satisfaction.
- *Basic personal needs.* Student expectations rise accordingly when basic personal needs are not acknowledged and addressed by the institution.

These data demonstrate the role that consumerism has on student expectations of their colleges and universities. The importance of student expectations cannot be underestimated, but institutional mission must be the driving force in determining what services are provided and in what fashion.

Expectations, Services, and Learning

Providing efficient and effective services for students is essential, but equally important, we must also strive to provide services in a fashion that complements our educational missions. Service

provision, in other words, must consider the learner as a focus, as well as the learning outcomes that will occur as a function of participating in the programs. Cross (2001) suggests that colleges are the “units” in which learning resides and that learning should occur across the institution, not just in the classroom. In other words, it is not as important what teachers teach; it is more important what students learn.

In recent years, the perceived disconnect between the educational and financial benefits of earning a degree has grown. In other words, many students fail to recognize the value of learning for learning’s sake (Tagg, 2003). Tagg observes that students, while physically present on campuses, are simultaneously psychologically absent. He further suggests that the fundamental challenge facing colleges today is to change the expectations of incoming students, their attitudes, and their beliefs about how they think about their school setting, academic work, and their own relationship to their academic institutions. “What we can say with fair confidence at this point is that most students who leave high school and enter college bring with them a set of attitudes and beliefs about schooling and their interaction with educational institutions that tend to insulate them against learning rather than to prepare them for it” (Tagg, 2003, p. 47) chapter 3 of this volume explores student engagement and the reality that many students are not learning and developing because they are not involved with their institutions or their own education.

Clearly there is much more involved in purchasing an education than buying any other product or service. Failure by students to grasp this can lead to great frustration and, more sadly, an unexamined life. The confluence of educational consumerism, assessment, business practices, and even state funding plans may be contributing to students’ reduced emphasis on the importance of real learning. Students fail to engage fully not only with faculty but with the out-of-class learning opportunities available on campuses today. Students to embrace the ethos that a college education is more than just attending classes, and institutional practices need to stimulate that understanding. Through developing an appreciation of the totality of the educational experience and the types of engagement that lead to learning, the dissonance between institutions’ expectations for students and student expectations for institutions can diminish.

As one enters any train in the London Underground, there are constant reminders to be personally responsible to “Mind the gap!” between the station platform and train doors because the gap varies with each station and passengers cannot take the distance for granted as the same at every station. Indeed, false expectations brought on by habit or inattention can result in personal physical disaster. Students too must mind the gap between the new rising expectations for learning at colleges and universities and their own preconceived consumer mentality of their expectations. Above all, students must be willing to change, for college makes students different—learning is the result of change. Equally important is that students must take responsibility for their own development and learning.

Although Londoners can expect the trains to be safe and efficient, students who come into a university or college should not expect first-class service delivery. A residence hall is not a hotel and cannot be run like one unless students are willing to pay at least \$100 a night every night of the semester.

Enlightened colleges and universities expect their residence halls to be integral components of the educational process, where learning occurs and the personal development of students is a primary goal. In residence halls, organizations that are an intentional and integral part of an institution's educational mission, staff members, including student resident assistants, are responsible for creating educational programs that help residents to engage their fellow residents in applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. This engagement outside the classroom leads to appreciating oneself as well as others of different backgrounds and beliefs while building a collegiate community. Students living together in an intentional educational community can learn to express their own beliefs and to be exposed to new ways of doing things while reinforcing or expanding their own values—they learn to negotiate, to compromise, and to lead.

A positive residence hall experience should extend a student's expectation beyond the consumer approach of a good overnight accommodation; certainly all students should expect and be provided with residence halls that are safe, clean, and comfortable. Various reports in the popular press, however, suggest that students are now expecting residence facilities that compete with some of the best hotels in the world, and, suggested earlier, some schools are attempting to meet this demand to keep the occupancy rates at optimum levels.

At the same time that students seek luxurious accommodations, they often thwart an institution's efforts to maximize learning opportunities... expect to live in private rooms, for example, often are seeking comfort zones that will protect them from the possibility of living with a roommate of a different racial or cultural background. Such students are failing to embrace the collegiate experience as an extraordinary opportunity to learn about other human beings. Engaging in higher education is a challenge and forces students to cross the gap of comfort that they seek.

The dissonance in expectations can be exemplified when students get frustrated when they have an argument with their new roommate and expect a resident assistant to immediately resolve the issue. The resolution to vacate a room rather than try to address the interpersonal problem is, in the view of many students, the better solution. Parents also will insert themselves into situations and are even encouraged to do so by their children while also failing to see the learning opportunities that can arise in such situations.

The dissonance between the harried student development educator in the residence hall and the involved parents and students can be palpable, because each party brings different expectations—the student affairs educator hopes for learning to occur, and the parents and students want immediate customer satisfaction. This dissonance can be resolved most productively if an involved parties focus on the root causes of problems and take personal responsibility for their action while being willing to work to change behaviors or attitudes that are most respectful of all involved. We must remind parents and students continually in nonprovocative ways that student development and learning occurs in many ways, including the interactions that occur between students outside of the classroom.

Davis and Murrell (1993) noted that research during the past two decades has demonstrated that the more energy that students direct into their academic lives, including becoming engaged with their studies and campus programs, the greater the likelihood of their having a positive college experience. Assuming that students are willing to learn, total student

development can occur that gives meaning through students' newfound knowledge and understanding.

An additional example of dissonance between expectations and reality can be found in financial aid operations across America. Every institution has an office of financial aid that disburses varying forms of federal, state, private, and institutional monies.

Funding agencies rigorously hold institutions to strict standards that ensure eligible students are provided all possible help within governmental financial aid guidelines.

Institutions also must also provide counseling for those with new loans and those who are exiting, so students fully understand their future fiscal obligations when their loans come due. Students and their families need information and expect high-quality service. Institutions, however, are continually frustrated in their quest to process aid forms for eligible students when many undergraduate and graduate students fail to provide accurate documentation in a timely fashion. Not surprisingly, students who fail to receive a financial aid award invariably blame their colleges, even when they, themselves, are responsible for the problem. Given the complexity of the financial aid process, students' unwillingness to tackle the required details properly is understandable, but managing one's own financial aid application is an important learning experience. Indeed, for many students, signing a promissory note is the first time they enter into a legal contract for which they will be responsible. The most successful student aid administrators are those who continually evaluate their operations and engage students in the process, making even this basic consumer activity a learning experience for students.

Of all administrative areas, career services operations can provide one of the best examples of dissonance when it comes to student expectations and campus realities. Administrators working in career services can speak volumes about the challenges of dealing with students who expect their career counselors to find jobs for them even on a moment's notice. Without fail as commencement approaches, students find their way to career services offices for the first time, despite the fact that they have been asked to participate in career seminars from their first semester of enrollment.

Career services professionals rightfully view themselves as educators who want to match students' aspirations and career opportunities with their capabilities. They want students to understand that the most satisfying positions come to those students who are cognizant of their own aspirations and abilities, and who are willing to work to overcome the gaps in their preparation. Regrettably, students, as consumers, can become dissatisfied quickly if they view their career services operation as an employment agency rather than an educational service linked to the institution's mission.

What Institutions Can Do: Strategies for Action

Make Student Expectations a Priority

We have examined the expectations that students have for the services and programs provided by their colleges and universities and considered the fact that, in many cases, what students expect is not the reality of what their institutions provide. This dissonance may be a result of an institutions failure to provide a promised service, or the quality of service is not what students

expected. In other instances, however, the expectations that students hold are based on their incorrect or inaccurate assumptions—students expected a certain service or program that the college does not offer. In the case of incorrect and inaccurate assumptions by students, colleges and universities may share part of the blame with the students. Too often, colleges fail to provide enough accurate and accessible information to enable students to know precisely what the institution provides and in what fashion.

The consequences of “expectations dissonance” can be very challenging for students as well for as their colleges and universities. Students expecting smoothly functioning financial aid services, for example, who find a mismanaged and inefficient campus system will be disgruntled and can feel mistreated by their institutions. Rather than speaking well of their alma maters, they can become negative ambassadors very quickly. Administrators, now more than ever, must recognize that the encounters and experiences that students have with campus program and service operations and the manner in which they are treated often are remembered for years beyond graduation.

Institutions can no longer afford to disregard the expectations of their students. If students feel they are receiving less than what they contracted for by enrolling at their colleges, they will make their voices heard collectively on campus, in state legislatures (especially for public institutions), in the media, and, not surprisingly, in the courts. Beyond the potential fallout from failing to provide quality programs, colleges and universities should want to maintain excellence in all aspects of their programs as a source of institutional pride. A college’s ethos is perhaps best exemplified in the manner in which it serves students; institutional values are evidenced through the daily fashion in which the college conducts its business. On the one hand, if students are treated with dignity and respect, they recognize that they are a priority. On the other, when students are not treated appropriately or served adequately, the reverse message is received.

To make student’s expectations a priority, colleges and universities need to create accurate expectations for students; routinely assess the quality of service programs and adapt services as needed; ensure that effective communications channels are in place and working; and create an institutional ethos that makes student expectations and student learning core institutional values. The remainder of this chapter addresses each of these strategies.

Create Accurate Expectations

In David Lipsky’s *Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point* (2003), the author describes the extraordinary experience and transformation that members of the Corps of Cadets undergo at the United States Military Academy (USMA). From their initial treatment at “Beast Barracks,” to marching to meals, the first-year student experience is an extraordinary one. What is so critical in helping the cadets to succeed under harsh and extremely clear in their recruitment and admissions materials, in their interviews with prospective students, and through the media. Even casual observers who have never had any direct contact with the USMA have a notion of what is expected of students at West Point and the rigorous demands that will be placed on them.

Conveying the reality of the USMA experience enables potential applicants to know what to expect when they enter West Point. The mission is clear and the expectations for students are

clear. All must pass the same tests, clear the same hurdles, and embrace the ethic of a professional soldier committed to duty, honor, and country. In return, the cadets, based on their accurate expectations of USMA, anticipate what they will receive, including professional skills, compensation, character development, monthly compensation, and eventually, a commission as an officer in the U.S. Army.

While there are only a handful of institutions that have missions similar to the USMA, most colleges and universities could benefit from applying the same rigor as West Point does in providing more accurate information about what enrollment in the institution means in the classroom, in out-of-class activities, and in the services that are provided. Utilizing carefully crafted Web sites, recruitment literature, admissions representatives, and alumni ambassadors, colleges and universities need to be more proactive in highlighting their mission and then conveying to prospective and current students how that mission is accomplished through various programs and services. Students need to comprehend the institution's methods for achieving its goals and how those methods will influence students' lives. How, for example, will the institution help the student find a job after graduation, if at all? Does the institution bring prospective employers to campus for student interviews? Are career fairs convened on a regular basis? The answers to these questions should be based on the mission and goals of the institution and how the organization implements those goals.

The need for focusing on institutional mission is critical when developing institutional information for prospective students. While the adage that families do more research when buying a \$25,000 automobile than they do when considering a \$120,000 investment in a college education may hold true, administrators should still work vigorously to bring clarity to prospective students on what it means to attend their institution. A college's admissions materials must enumerate how attendance at the institution will make a difference—how matriculation will affect the student's life. To do so, of course, means that the institution itself needs to know how students change as a result of their enrollment at the college.

An institution's mission must be at the forefront when making decisions regarding student services and programs and the integration of those activities with the academic experience. The mission statement is the glue that guides all decisions regarding what a college offers and in what fashion. If students then understand and embrace the mission, they will be able to develop a more accurate set of expectations regarding their college experience. This is particularly true in the area of services and programs. Students who attend a professional school with a narrow focus geared to providing a specific credential should not expect broad opportunities for enrolling in courses that diverge greatly from the fields offered by the institution. Similarly, the programs and services provided by that school, and the nature in which the services are provided, should complement and support the academic program.

The mission-specific information that is prepared to help students must be comprehensive to prepare students for their college experience. Without such information, how can administrators think that students will understand what to expect, let alone what the institution expects of them? Why, for example, does an institution provide residence halls, career services, or student activities? What role does the distribution of financial aid play in the mission of the institution? How does the delivery of service in these operations support the mission of the institution? Are these realistic questions asked by senior administrators? Or, if the questions are

asked, how are the answers conveyed to students so they know what to expect? Without information from the college how would a first-year student know that living in a residence hall is considered an integral part of the developmental experience for undergraduates as much as it is a place to plug in their computers and DVD players?

Assess, Adapt, and Anticipate

Institutional assessment efforts should be geared, in part, toward identifying student expectations as they entered the institution, whether they are being met, and, if not what can be done to address student concerns. Without such efforts, colleges cannot know whether they are meeting their goals and the expectations of their students. Simultaneously, when trends appear in the data that suggest a widely perceived problem, efforts can be undertaken to address the concerns. “To plan effectively and make the critical decisions that affect our student affairs divisions and institutions, we must have the ability to gather information in a rational, planned, financially, feasible, and believable fashion” (Bender, 1995).

Comprehensive national research on student expectations has, for example, highlighted “academic advising” as an endless source of frustration for students at countless institutions (Low, 2000). Perhaps from expectations developed through watching Mr. Chip’s films, or promises made in recruitment literature, college students expect to have routine and sustained interactions with a faculty member who will guide them through the collegiate experience. The reality of how academic advising works, however, varies greatly. Some factors that influence how academic advising is conceptualized and delivered include the nature and size of an institution, a student’s major, whether or not faculty signatures are required when registering or dropping courses, and whether advising undergraduate or graduate students is even considered a part of a faculty member’s job description. These institutional realities, however, are not necessarily understood or embraced by students who expect individual attention. Academic advising is just one aspect of the college experience that must be portrayed accurately prior to enrollment. Students need to know what to expect, so that disappointment will not influence their overall satisfaction with their colleges and universities.

Monitoring student utilization of services and programs and the reasons students may not be engaging in them will also help to identify whether resources are directed or delivered appropriately and whether the students consider the service or program beneficial. As suggested by Schuh and Upcraft, “If our intended clientele do not use what we offer, then our intended purposes cannot be achieved” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 113). Gathering, maintaining, and using comprehensive evaluative data regarding programs and services will enable institutions to make informed decisions about the allocation of resources (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 114).

Anticipating student expectations can be difficult, but using sound benchmarking practices as suggested earlier, can help considerably throughout the process. Benchmarking can enable colleges and universities to compare their programs with the best practices of other comparable operations to identify new ways of doing things. Especially important in the Internet age, if one college has instituted an innovative and successful practice that engages students, administrators can be sure that students across the country will know about the innovation and ask why the new program or service is not available on their campus.

Of particular importance in this process is the need to keep institutional mission in the forefront. Are the new programs or services for which students are clamoring appropriate for another institution? Do they complement the institutional mission? Do they appropriately engage students in activities to foster learning? These questions must always be asked when trying to meet student expectations.

Provide Communication Channels

In addition to formal assessments of services, the creation and use of easily accessible communications methods can provide students with opportunities to raise questions and voice their concerns before problems become crises. Minor problems with service delivery can escalate to major student dissatisfaction with the institution when deficiencies are not addressed. Electronic and paper suggestion boxes, telephone surveys, and advertising widely the names and contact information for administrators and faculty to whom concerns should be voiced can make a big difference in resolving problems with campus services. Some institutions have also appointed people to serve as ombudspersons, or independent advocates, to help research and resolve complaints for all campus constituencies.

Maintain Institutional Integrity

When describing our institutional missions and the services we provide, our primary concern must be to do so with accuracy and integrity. Much like the question asked during accreditation processes, “Are we doing what we say we are doing?” institutional leaders must ensure that their colleges and universities follow through on what they promise their students. If an institution promises in its literature that students will receive routine academic advising and learn in small class setting, for example, then such expectations must be met. The most significant indicator of a higher education institution’s values is the manner in which it conducts its business and provides its services to its multiple publics, especially its students. It is incumbent on institutional leaders to ensure that the services that are provided are those that are promised.

References

- Ardaiolo, f. P. (1978). *Educational consumer protection at Indiana Unveristy*. Unpublished dissertation, Indiana Univeristy, Bloomington.
- Associated Press. (2003, November 29). Advocate helps parents adjust to college demands. *Home New Tribune*. A2.
- Bender, B. (1995, March). *NASPA symposium on institutional research, assessment, and evaluation: An examination of contemporary practice in student affairs*. Program presentation, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators National Conference, San Diego.
- College Parents of America. (2003). Retrieved December 2, 2003, from <http://www.collegeparents.org/advocacy.html>.

- Cross, K. P. (2001, July-Aug.). Leading-edge efforts to improve—the Hesburgh Awards. *Change*, 31-37.
- Davis, T. M., & Murrell, P. H. (1993). *Turning learning into teaching: The role of student responsibility in the collegiate experience*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, no. 8. Washington, DC: George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- Low, L. (2000). *Are college students satisfied? A national analysis of changing expectations*. New Agenda Series. Indianapolis: USA Group.
- Lipsky, D. (2003). *Absolutely American: Four years at West Point*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- The nation: Students, their attitude and characteristics. (2002, August 30). *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. 26-31.
- Tagg, J. (2003). *The learning paradigm college*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Upcraft, M. L., & Schuh, J. H. (1996). *Assessment in student affairs: A guide for practitioners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dissonance

Clearly, a far greater portion of students who enter higher education expect to complete degrees in a timely fashion than actually do. Not surprisingly, the unmet expectation, or dissonance, presents a challenge to colleges and universities. Most students hope to attain degrees in college, and that is a logical aspiration associated with the college experience. If students make informed choices about college choice and have the expectation to persist, and if colleges make informed and educated admission decisions, then persistence to degree attainment should be the result.

There are exceptions to this, of course, and many students enrolled in college, particularly in two-year institutions, with less clarity in their expectations about outcomes associated with degree completion. Students who start college to enhance their personal growth or secure a credential or skill are valued members of the college population, and exemplify the reality that not all students who do not attain degrees have failed to attain their expected goal.

There is a substantial difference between the examination of institutional persistence rates and the rates at which individual students attain degrees. Although only 43% of degree-seeking students entering postsecondary education when they started had attained them at their original institution within six years, 54% of them had earned them somewhere. Therefore, 11% had persisted to degree completion by transferring from their original institution. This is a good indication of individual commitment of the students and a reflection of higher education's success, but not necessarily a shining moment for the original colleges where students began their studies. Recalling that almost all students expect to graduate from where they first enrolled, it seems that the unmet expectations of students remain a challenge for colleges and universities across the country. In other words, did the school prepare their incoming students adequately, through dissemination of materials or orientation programs, to enable them to form realistic expectations?

Clearly, some student attrition is expected and appropriate. Students leave college for health reasons, some decide that they are not suited for college study, and others develop new

career objectives that are unattainable at the institutions in which they initially enrolled. The latter experience is actually attrition of success and may well be a function of good career counseling or academic advising.

Nonetheless, the rate at which student expectations are not met does present problems for which institutions need solutions. A premise of this work has been that when student expectations are unmet, there are several means of addressing the situation. One approach is that students need to be better informed about what they can reasonably expect. Another perspective is that institutions need to perform better and meet students' reasonable expectations. Ultimately, the responsibility is that of the higher education community. Degree attainment is a fundamental purpose, a driving force in American higher education, so those who enter college with an expectation to complete degrees should not be discouraged from realizing their goals.

Institutional Strategies for Addressing the Issues

There are strategies that institutions can employ to better understand student expectations and to meet those that are reasonable while renegotiating the ones that are not. Some such strategies are described in the following section.

Student Recruitment

It is not clear how students formulate their expectations about how they will succeed in a particular college community, but certainly a great portion of their perceptions come from institutional recruiters and written and electronic materials about the institution. As suggested in Chapter 5 of this volume, if students are given an accurate picture of institutional characteristics and they are fully informed about the qualifications of students who succeed, they can make judgements about how they compare with those who persist. It also may be useful for prospective students to know some things about students who do not succeed. Not every college is a good match for every possible student. If students are well informed about the institutions they choose, they are better able to make intelligent and good decisions about how they will acclimate to the college environment and whether they are likely to persist until graduation.

Recruitment processes should be forthright about institutional cultures, subcultures, and the dynamics of campus life. There are college communities with cultural frameworks that are presentative of institutional values that might not resonate well with all prospective students. Students need to know these values and the campus climate to be able to measure how and whether they will fit comfortably in the environment.

The nature and extent of support services, such as academic advising, counseling services, and the availability of faculty for consultation, needs to be advertised to prospective students. There are institutions that have assertive, even intrusive, support systems, for example, that challenge students who are academic difficulty and can make certain types of students very uncomfortable and unhappy. There are other institutions with student support systems that require the individual student to seek assistance. The student who needs help in these types of colleges must be self-motivated to find and ask for help. Part of the challenge faced by admissions representatives is the difficult associated with meetin individually with prospective students to learn the extent to which they are likely to fit into the college's undergraduate

community. There are institutions that require an interview as part of the application process, and this is a good strategy in the effort to measure the student-institution fit, but given financial constraints both for applications and colleges, this important aspect of the admissions process is often neglected.

Program Strategies

Research about student persistence has generated much useful information about programs that make a difference in the proportion of successful degree attainment within a student community. Institutions should know the characteristics of their students who do not persist and develop program responses that address the issues that point toward risk of attrition.

- *Orientation programs* should be candid and informative. They should provide genuine and honest introductions to college life, stressing the academic aspects of the experience as well as the co-curricular issues. The programs should strike a balance between those issues associated with the classroom experiences of students and those outside of class. Faculty, staff, and students should all be part of the design and production of these programs.
- *Academic advising* should be learner centered and developmental in nature, with a focus on matching honestly the interests and skills of students with curriculum offerings of the institution.
- *Student advocacy programs* should be offered to help students navigate institutional bureaucracies. Peers helping peers or faculty mentoring programs can be effective problem-solving resources for students feeling challenged by the realities of college.
- *Academic major alternatives* can be developed for high-demand, high-attrition major fields. If popular majors have high failure rates, institutions should identify secondary disciplines with related career and professional school options.
- *Parent and family orientation programs* can provide families with access to the institution and support for their interests. The families of first-generation college students can be specifically targeted for information distribution and instructional approaches to give them insight about the college experience.
- *Commuter student services and programs* are also effective tools for engaging those students not living on campus. At many institutions with residential populations, the commuter student is more at risk of attrition. Where that is the case, institutions can set up places, programs, and advocacy organizations to give them particular support.
- *Community service and service learning programs* have been demonstrated to have relationship to persistence. Where appropriate, institutions can use such programs to engage students and to enhance their connection to the institution and its programs.
- *First-year seminars* are used widely at institutions as strategies for new student acculturation to the environment and as extended orientation activities with form, substance, and structure.
- *Probation students* are at risk by definition, whether their probation is a condition of entry due to an incoming academic profile or due to poor college performance. Programs

that stimulate connection, enhance achievement, and establish links to subsequent enrollment periods can be very helpful to at-risk students.

Intervention Strategies

A number of intervention strategies are available to colleges and universities, and among them are responding to signals and researching risk factors.

- *Responding to signals.* Students usually find ways to signal disaffection and unhappiness with their college experience. They may miss classes, act out in residence halls, or seek personal counseling. No matter what behaviors that students exhibit, other members of the institutional community can influence their subsequent decisions. When an office staff member hears students complaining about the residence halls, for example, the right response make a difference. A resident assistant who hears students criticizing food service or difficulties with the computer network can intercede effectively. The appropriate institutional approach to such matters is make students persistence and educational attainment the business of all members of the institutional community. When all who interact with students assume the responsibility to help them adjust and persist and support the resolution of their problems, the culture of attainment can be enhanced.
- *Researching risk factors.* Programmatic approaches to enhance persistence can be effective, but the decisions students ultimately make are complex and highly individual. The very complicated process of individual decisions making about where to enroll in college is not very different from the process of decision making about whether to persist. Therefore, the most effective interventions may be those targeted to individual students demonstrated to be at risk of attrition. There is evidence of success with this approach (Glynn, Sauer, & Miller, 2003).

The HERI report previously cited (Astin & Oseguera, 2002) suggests a set of predictive factors, including high school grades, standardized test scores, gender, and race. Institutions can supplement that information with additional studies of students, collecting individual descriptive and attitudinal information. It is possible to have a complex and institutionally specific risk prediction study that effectively anticipates the risk of an individual student leaving the institution. Knowing this in advance empowers institutional officials to prescribe remedies and interventions. Some examples follow.

The American Council on Education issued an *Issue Brief* (2003) that presented NCES data associated with, among other things, employment. Those students with jobs of more than 35 hours of work per week were substantially less likely to persist to degree attainment than those who worked fewer than 15 hours per week. Individual institutions should explore the work interests and intentions of their students can respond accordingly. If the institution determine that the significant off-campus employment of a student is a predictor of attrition, a specific intervention for all such students would be to develop an effective on-campus alternative. The student who is working in a job off campus may find that a position providing support to the research of a faculty member is more stimulating, academically relevant, and career enhancing. Institutions using their resources to develop meaningful on-campus employment opportunities for students will find that placement of students who

would alternatively be working off campus may have a very good effect on persistence. The effective strategy would be to identify those students working or planning to work off campus and invite them to the on-campus alternative.

Many institutions relate financial need to persistence decisions and worry about the gap between student need and funded financial aid. The problems associated with closing the aid gap are many, as substantial expense is involved. Further, since not all students with unmet need will drop out, if the gap in aid is closed for all, there would be some wasted resources. One strategy for addressing the aid gap is to focus on those students who have a real gap in aid that is different from the apparent one. Students disenfranchised from their families or from family circumstances where there is less support than is apparent certainly are at risk of attrition, and their risk level is unique to their individual circumstances. If financial aid administrators can hold in reserve funds to address those with more need than is apparent they may be able to make an effective difference for a special at-risk population.

There is evidence (Jacoby, 2000) that student who commute to campus have more challenge engaging with the institutional community. When family circumstances or life changes affect commuting students and the home dynamics change, enrollment consequences may follow. When the family of a commuting student moves the household or parents divorce or other life-changing experiences develop, students can be substantial risk. In such circumstances, on-campus housing, if available, can be a cost-effective way for the student to be enabled to focus on the college experience and have a greater prospect for success.

Students who are uncertain about their major choices may benefit from an intervention associated with career planning. Strong relationships between those providing academic advising and those offering career advising are powerful partnerships in enhancing student success. The student who reflects a lack of confidence in major choice can benefit greatly from interaction with professionals in career development and acquire, as a result, a sense of direction and purpose.

There are other ways in which specific interventions can be employed to respond to the needs of students at risk of attrition. Individual institutions should explore their knowledge about their students and examine ways to identify those at risk in advance based upon characteristics at entry or shortly after enrolling. When those at risk are identified, intelligent interventions can be designed to support and assist students in their persistence to degree completion.

Conclusion

Higher education is challenged by the expectations of students and the general public regarding persistence and degree attainment. That one would enroll in college with the plan that a degree is the desired and expected end product seems logical. If the student wants a degree, surely the institution wants the student to earn it, and the school should work accordingly to facilitate the outcome. What matters most is to understand the context student expectations and what happens between the beginning of the relationship with the college and the end to change the outcome.

It is clear that part of the dissonance between the expectation and the reality is derived from the students holding other expectations that intrude on those related to persistence. Whether the

matter is too substantial a commitment to employment, academic or career goals that are unreasonable, or judgements about academic effort that result in failure, the decisions that students make that have nothing to do with the institution can result in their degree expectations being fulfilled. What institutions need to do in this respect is to give counsel, information, and an orientation about the reality of the student experience and try to help students develop attitudes and behaviors that can enhance their chances of success.

At the same time that institutions should work with students to help them establish reasonable expectations of themselves and their institutions, there are ways in which institutions could perform better to increase persistence rates and the rates of degree attainment by students. Institutions should study the characteristics and the expectations of their students and determine which ones are predictors of attrition or those that lead to risk. They should intervene with students who display those characteristics and expectations and try to modify the circumstances to give the students a better chance of persisting.

References

- American Council on Education. (2003). *Issue brief*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Astin, A.W., & Oseguera, L. (2002). *Degree attainment rates at American colleges and universities*. Los Angeles: University of California, Higher Education Research Institute.
- Berkner, L., He, S., & Cataldi, E. F. (2002). *Descriptive summary of 1995-96 beginning postsecondary students: Six years later* (NCES 2003151). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Glynn, J. G., Sauer, P.L., & Miller, T. E. (2003). Signaling student retention with prematriculation data. *NASPA Journal*, 41, 41-67.
- Horn, L. J., & Premo, M. D. (1995). *Profile of undergraduates in U.S. post-secondary education institutions: 1992-93, with an essay on undergraduates at risk* (NCES 96-237). Washington, SC: U.S. Department of Education, national Center for Education Statistics.
- Jacoby, B (2000). *Involving commuter students in learning*. New Direction for Higher Education, no. 109. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.
- Principal indicators of student academic histories in postsecondary education 1972-2000*. (2004). Retrieved January 27, 2004, from <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/prinindicat/index.html>.
- United States Census. (2000). *Profile of selected social characteristics: 2000*. (2000). Retrieved February 25, 2004, from <http://factfinder.census.gov/hom/en/datanotes/expaiansf.htm>.
- Smith, P. (2004). *The quiet crisis*. Bolton. MA: Anker.

