

Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education

By Neal Raisman

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In Neal Raisman's book, *Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education*, he reinforces the value of service in an era of ever-increasing consumerism and establishes its worth within the hallowed halls of higher learning. Although colleges and universities have long been seen as bastions of intellectual and moral development and thus were exempt from traditional market mechanisms, Raisman suggested that providing good service should be inherent in higher education jobs, as it is every institution's mission to "serve students." By serving students well, he contended, campuses will see direct benefits in their student enrollment and retention.

Raisman, who is president and the founder of AcademicMAPS and has served as a community college president, divided the book into three primary sections. In the first 19 chapters he discussed what customer service is, why it is important, and the value it has in an academic community. Raisman did not suggest that providing quality service to students is the same as a merchandiser, like Wal-Mart, providing quality service to its customers. He accurately pointed out that students are not really customers, but rather, clients. As clients, students are sometimes unhappy, and, in his view, that is perfectly

acceptable. Raisman used the analogy that colleges and universities are like doctors; they may have to give suggestions and feedback that are unpleasant and/or untimely, but ultimately are in the best interest of the people they serve. In fact, students expect excellent service, even if it means giving unpopular direction or advice. To do something different would be cheating the students, thereby devaluing the educational experience.

In Chapter 20, Raisman introduced 13 Principles of Customer Service in Higher Education. He used the next 13 chapters to more fully detail each of the principles:

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| Principle One | Students should be given courteous and concerned attention to their needs and valued as people. |
| Principle Two | Students should come before personal or college-focused goals. |
| Principle Three | The processes, rules and regulations of higher education should be fully and actually student-centered. |
| Principle Four | Be honest in all communications and do not patronize students. |
| Principle Five | Students can never be an inconvenience. |
| Principle Six | There must be a proper match between product and the customer. |
| Principle Seven | Just because it was someone else who did something that would hurt a student does not relieve you of doing what is right. |
| Principle Eight | Students deserve an environment that is neat, bright, welcoming and safe. |
| Principle Nine | Students are not really customers. |
| Principle Ten | The customer is <i>not</i> always right. |
| Principle Eleven | Satisfaction is not the gauge of successful customer service in college. |
| Principle Twelve | Do not cheapen the product in the name of customer service. No pandering. |
| Principle Thirteen | To every problem there is more than one solution and they often are external rather than within academia. |

His chapters on Principles Ten and Eleven are particularly notable. With Principle Ten, he argued that students are not always right, although they do have the right to question and to be informed when they are incorrect. Raisman used the example of a student seeking a high grade to illustrate his point. “Simply because a student feels he or she paid for a good grade is not a reason to automatically provide her all A’s” (p. 103). Students should expect to be wrong and to learn from their mistakes as part of the educational process for which they (or their families) are paying. The chapter on Principle Eleven delves into student satisfaction, and why it should not be used as a measure of a college’s success in serving its customers. According to Raisman, if it was an institution’s goal to satisfy everyone, then all students would receive high marks and, at some point, the value of an A or B+ becomes just as unsatisfying as a C. Since satisfaction itself is short-lived, Raisman contended it is “too low a target” to use in assessing an institution’s service. Besides, Raisman suggested, “satisfaction is not the service the customer is purchasing” (p. 105). Value for their money and the return on their investment is what students and their families desire most from a college or university.

In the final grouping of chapters, Raisman established the Tier Zero Customer Service concept. This concept employed the 13 principles for organizations to provide customer service in a preemptive way so that potential problems may be avoided. The Tier Zero concept did not assume that problems are eliminated, or that by being a Tier Zero institution the school will be nationally ranked, but it did imply that by recognizing needs and addressing them before they are problematic, students, faculty and staff are assured that their voices are heard. An example Raisman gave of a Tier Zero solution centered on the traditionally long lines at registration, bursar, and record’s offices. In a “better” effort, a school might use an attendant, not unlike the airlines at their ticket counters, to direct people to the proper station and even take their completed forms and checks whenever possible. In a “best” Tier Zero solution, the institution would remove the lines altogether by utilizing software for on-line registration, bill paying, and record checking. In this model, students needing to see a college representative would not have to wait in long lines to speak to someone about their particular situations and circumstances. This concept also allows the staff in those offices to focus on working directly with students in a personalized way that often can not occur when long lines and frayed nerves are the norm.

Embrace the Oxymoron is a quick read that provides valuable insight for organizations within academia that are exploring service as a tool to improve their reputations. The book is particularly beneficial to those institutions that struggle with enrollment and retention. By simplifying the issue of customer service into small, direct points, and encouraging Tier Zero solutions to problems, Raisman created a resource that can be used by administrators, staff, and faculty.