

Who Is Our Customer?

by Stephen B. Friedheim

The answer to this question is at the heart of a private career college. No, it could be even more important: it could be the very soul of the institution. The answer represents a shift, I think, in how we see ourselves and, maybe more significantly, in how we would be seen by others. It has been a change for me, the guy who distributed thousands of pins all over the country that read, "STUDENTS COME FIRST!!!" This was an AICS strategy designed to separate our institutions from those in the public sector where students were often treated in a cavalier manner. Career colleges and schools, on the other hand, had traditionally designed programs with students in mind—scheduling classes at times convenient to the student and offering the essential subject matter needed to succeed on the job, etc. The pin was to represent an outward manifestation of an inward commitment

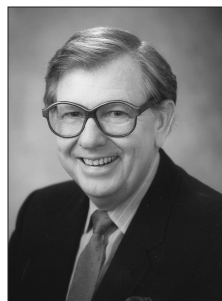
to students.

The change in my thinking about our primary customer didn't occur overnight. It was a lengthy process that took me into lots of discussions with lots of career school folk before it finally jelled in my mind. Once I found it and was convinced of it, it seemed ever so clear, in spite of its

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being ever so radical to my earlier frame of reference. An elaboration may be helpful to see how this concept developed.

My wife, Jan, and I came to this new point of view after being exposed to Dr. W. Edwards Deming's theories regarding the quality movement. He is known as the "father" of the quality philosophy and all the proponents look to him and his vision as the focal point. Dr. Deming was the



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He spends most of his time in the college directing the marketing and public relations efforts. He also finds time to serve as a consultant to various organizations that want to improve their relationships with the private career school sector of higher education.

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person who turned Japan around after the Second World War and is given credit for the phenomenal success they've had in the past fifty years. Interestingly enough,

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he went to Japan after the American auto industry turned a cold shoulder to him and refused to consider his concepts. Following their near demise from

Japanese competition, they rethought the concepts and adopted them.

Deming¹ advocated the adoption of "The New Philosophy," saying, "We are in a new economic age. Western management must awaken to the challenge, must learn their responsibilities, and take on leadership for change." Deming was one of the first to ask organizations to look more closely at their real mission and scope of work. His theories caused us to take a second look at the *customer* question. It was not out of lack of respect or lack of dedication to student needs—individually and collectively—rather it was out of recognition that students cannot judge the quality of the college's offerings as effectively as can the employer because they come at the question from two entirely different perspectives. The student lacks the real-world-of-work perspective needed to judge how well the college's curriculum and related properties fill the bill of today's office professional.

Employers, on the other hand, hire and evaluate performance everyday on the basis of the job to be done and their expectations of the employees. Here is

the true test of an institution's success in fulfilling its mission. Certainly, having to excel in all aspects of the education and placement of the student/graduate must be a central focus of the institution. However, this cannot be provided in a vacuum; there must be a clear nexus between the employers' needs and the institution's performance.

Students seen as the products of the institution are more carefully "produced" with a clear, concise, accurate work order from the employer. If the employer is satisfied with the product, he/she will more readily return to the "factory" to order more, will more often encourage others to "buy" from us either as students or employers, and will more frequently promote our products to higher positions within the organization.

Recognizing that the employer is the primary customer is a radical concept that, without doubt, most non-career-oriented institutions fail to grasp. It is similar to looking at our institutions as being in *hire* education as opposed to *higher* education. But that difference is the very essence of why our college is different from others that take longer and cost less. Seeing the students as the products as opposed to customers may seem dehumanizing to some until it's recognized that to do otherwise is to do a disservice to them by ignoring the reality of how and where our graduates will ultimately be judged from a quality standpoint. It is that conception of reality that gives us the slightly different turn in perception from others that will make all the difference in the world to the student and the employer at the same time.

For some this is not an easy concept to grasp or support. For others it comes down to a question of the chicken or the egg – which came first, which is more important, etc. But organizational gurus tell us that every organization needs a

¹Deming designed 14 points that he said would lead to a paradigm shift in the way management occurs. Those interested in a full discussion on how his 14 points relate to and can be implemented by private career schools should review a monograph developed by AICS in 1989, published by McGraw-Hill, entitled, "Quality Assurance for Private Career Schools."

credo and that the stronger and more sincere the credo, the more effective the organization. Getting the entire staff and faculty on the same page, moving in the same direction becomes the challenge.

At our quarterly meetings that are attended by all members of the staff and faculty, we regularly review our progress

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toward our annual goals. Discussion about our mission is an essential part of that activity. This includes conversation about our customer—our real customer. Following a recent meeting, one staff member commented that she thought that the employer was “merely the end user.” She suggested that the institution’s energy should be recognized as being centered on the student “who has chosen to exchange money for our educational product, who chooses to attend the college, and who chooses to open his/her mind to courageously venture forth into personal growth and professional development.”

Her perception of the student is quite accurate; however, putting the perception of the employer in a subservient position to the student creates the danger that has plagued too many public institutions. These institutions have been coming under attack more and more because of the public’s dissatisfaction with their output: too few students graduate, too few work in an area related to the courses taken, and too many have to subsequently acquire the skills necessary to gain employment. These institutions are being faced with the need to respond to the question, “What have you done for me lately?” as in “What am I supposed to do with what you taught

me?” That is a question that career colleges should be able to answer easily. The better the answer, the better the impression of the college in the minds of those paying the bills and those hiring the graduates.

Seeing employers as “merely the end user” leaves them out of the equation, making them minor players in the process. Employers must have more of a participatory role in the conduct of the institution than “merely” hiring the graduate. The choice of curriculum, the determination of faculty preparation and the selection of equipment, software, and textbooks are natural fodder for employer-advisors. The greater their role, the more appropriate the education process will be for the clientele served.

Having employers as the key component of the continuous improvement process (another Deming concept) allows the institution to open the door of opportunity to the widest degree for its graduates. When employers work closely with the institution on deciding what should be included in the curriculum and what skill levels should be achieved, the student can feel a sense of confidence that there is a real reason to

learn what’s being taught. This process assures a high level of employer validation. Another indication of this validation is the percentage of graduates placed in an occupation directly related to the training. The higher the percentage, the more likely that the employer is satisfied with the “product.” Placement statistics for the institution will inevitably improve as a natural outgrowth of employer participation, and the increased perception of the employer as the primary customer by the staff and faculty will increase the relativity of the workplace in

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the curriculum, thus providing better real world preparation for the student.

This can be enhanced by regular appearances of graduates and employers in classroom presentations that tie the instruction directly into the job being performed by the graduate. This is one meaningful way to communicate employer validation to the current student population. Conducting annual surveys with employers about the ever-

changing technology in the occupational fields being provided by the institution is another way to tighten the links with employers.

I must admit that I still think that "STUDENTS COME FIRST!!!" But I now believe that they come first...right after employers.