

## Doing the ‘Business’ of Education



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Many of us in the education sector bristle when we are asked to consider our students as *customers*. Yet clearly the Baldrige performance excellence process requires that we not only consider them as *customers*, but as our *stakeholders*. Using such decidedly “business-model” jargon, we feel, detracts from our noble and altruistic mission to educate, empower, and develop informed citizens who will carry the mantle of American democracy for future generations. In his, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors: a Monograph to Accompany ‘Good to Great,’* author Jim Collins provides a kernel of wisdom to help assuage our discomfort. In a moment of epiphany, he states:

That’s when it dawned on me: we need a new language. The critical distinction is not between business and social, but between great and good. We need to reject the naïve imposition of the “language of business” on the social sectors, and instead jointly embrace a *language of greatness*.

I would like to suggest that the “critical distinction” may not be one of language, but of semantics. I suspect that our reluctance to view our students as *customers* derives from the implication about what the commodity is that students are purchasing from our institutions: a grade? a credential? a certificate? a diploma? Perhaps this implication is a function of a society that has adopted ‘instant gratification’ as its mantra. After all, when we walk into Best Buy and lay down our money—or apply for the credit we need—we expect to walk out of that store with our new high-definition television right then, or at least with a delivery/installation appointment a day or two away! Given this understanding of what it means to be a customer, it should come as no surprise that educators seek other metaphors to describe the relationship between them and their students, whether it be the ‘teacher-learner,’ ‘mentor-mentee,’ ‘master-apprentice,’ or other relationship metaphor. The fact remains, though, that our students or their parents pay taxes and/or tuition and fees; that is, they *spend* their money at our institutions. We use that money—sometimes supplemented by the state or other governance bodies, depending on the type of institution we are—for the operations of our campuses: building and energy costs, personnel costs, administrative costs, technology costs, grounds keeping, etc. If these aren’t the realities of business, then I need to pay a visit to my high

school economics teacher and ask for my parents' tax money back! The point is that, like it or not, we are in the *business* of education.

How, then, do we reconcile this business-customer relationship reality with the idea that our educator-student relationship somehow transcends the fiscal reality of the service we provide? The way out of this conundrum lies in the answer to the question posed earlier, "What is the commodity purchased from our institutions? Here is where the fundamental difference between our business relationship with our students and that of the retail centers they frequent can be resolved. For the commodity our students purchase is not a grade, credential, certificate, or diploma; in fact, it is an equity stake in their own personal, academic, and professional development. For what we provide them is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, once they gain the attitudes, skills, and knowledge of our curriculum and apply their newly acquired attitudes, skills, and knowledge to attain their individual goals.

Are students our customers? You bet! But that doesn't mean we just hand over a diploma because they pay tuition. It does mean, though, that we had better anticipate their needs and then meet and exceed those needs if we are to provide high quality customer service. If we don't, there are plenty of local and global competitors waiting to cut into our market share.

In short, by acknowledging that we are a business and that students are one of our key customer segments; by engaging our entire college community in the effort to best determine, deliver, assess, and continuously improve the delivery of the product sought by these customers (achievement of learning outcomes); and by applying the discipline of the Baldrige Criteria to integrate our myriad approaches to ensuring student success across all of the process and results categories, Richland College has begun to answer that toughest of all questions in the educational arena: How do we know our students are learning what we set out for them to learn?

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