

## 1999 FACTC FOCUS

### Students as Customers

Earlier this year, the members of the Faculty Association of Community and Technical Colleges observed that it is increasingly popular for politicians, administrators, business people, students, and faculty to refer to students as "customers." Spring Quarter 1999 we asked Washington State Community and Technical College faculty to respond to the question, "How does the use of the 'student as customer' metaphor change the process and outcomes of education and the student/faculty relationship?" Some fifty full- and part-time faculty representing a variety of disciplines and campuses responded to our call. You have our thanks and gratitude for your willingness to share your views with your colleagues. You have provided a great deal to consider for those of us who champion or challenge the metaphor, and its impact on the contributions of the community colleges of Washington toward the welfare of our state's citizenry. We would have liked to publish every contribution, each one in its entirety; however, both space and economic considerations required that we edit some responses. We sincerely hope that we were able to retain the spirit and intention of your contribution. Your editing and publication team: Nancy Moore (Green River), Leslie Potter-Henderson (Shoreline), and Sheri Renner (Spokane).

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#### *Francis M. Albin, Business Highline Community College*

The "student as customer" is a very appropriate topic and deserves analysis. The statement itself clarifies the fact more people are referring to students as customers. The initiator of such a metaphor could become a major change agent for education, and by doing so, change the role of the educator.

Could the expressions of "student as client" or "student as patient" be used interchangeably with customer? The terms *metaphor*, *process*, and *outcomes* should be analyzed for their subjective application in education. Framing the metaphor as well as "processes" and "outcomes" begs the question: "Who determines the intentionality of purpose of these words?"

Politicians may be the change agent through the legislative process. Professional administrators could be the change agent through incrementalism and changing relationships within organizational structures. Big business and its technology are major change agents. It is doubtful that faculty coined the phrase "student as customer" because of faculty's traditional role.

"Student as customer" represents a shift in education's intent in general and of the educator in particular. From a business perspective, the student as customer would be subjectively based on a "satisfaction result."

The term **student** in a *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* has the definition of "scholar, learner, especially: one who attends a school, one who studies, an attentive and systematic observer." A **customer** was defined as "one that purchases a commodity or service; an individual usually having some specified distinctive trait . . ."

How does the concept of "customer" fit with the term faculty, teacher, or instructor? If the term customer cannot be defined for education, then it can be used subjectively by politicians, administrators, business people, and faculty.

Business terms creeping into education include "building based management" and "strategic planning." Titles of CEO, vice president, and chief financial officer are replacing titles of president, dean, and manager. These private sector terms sound similar, but they are misnomers in public

education. School boards and trustees are seeking leaders from business and the military to run their schools. Business and labor groups are urging schools toward providing job skills over education with "workforce training," "tech prep," "certificates of mastery," "internship," "school to work training," "technical writing," and so on.

The work of faculty is not well understood by politicians, administrators, business people, and even those new to teaching. Everyone can recognize a picture of a classroom. Americans spend a decade or more as students. Yet an instructor's work remains a mystery. An important area is pedagogy where instructors work at various ways to cover troublesome or abstractive concepts of course material. It often challenges the student's subjective perception of reality. This is counter to the "student as customer" business metaphor where the bias is for satisfaction. Pedagogy is also an area where people confuse instruction with the sharing of information with staff and students.

In business, waiters and store employees are probably comfortable with the word customer and the historical context surrounding the word. Education still begins by calling things by their right name and *Webster's* is still a good starting point.

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**Marylynne Diggs, English**  
**Clark College**

When we use the concept of students as "customers," we promote a number of analogies that have devastating implications for student responsibilities, student performance, and the basic value of academic freedom.

- We all know that the first rule of retail is that "the customer is always right." If educational institutions suggest to students or legislators that students are our customers, we lose the authority to determine what educational policies and practices are effective. We run the risk of catering to "consumer pressures" to do what is merely popular with students, regardless of its effectiveness. For example, students may decide that they don't like attendance policies, but attendance policies may help students stay disciplined and motivated. What they *don't like* may nonetheless be effective.
- Customers purchase a product or service from businesses or retailers and expect such purchases to save them time or make their lives easier. Students who are taught to think of their classes as products they are purchasing may adopt the attitude that they are paying for this, so they should not have to come to class or do any work they do not want to do. I have taught at a school that used this metaphor, and my students regularly said, "I'm paying the money here, so I shouldn't have to do anything I don't want to." I actually had to include in my attendance policy a statement that said, "While you may think you have purchased college credits by paying your tuition and fees, you must still earn those credits through effective performance and completion of the work assigned. Your money does not purchase credits; your performance does. Money merely gives you the right to try." This sounds snooty and defensive, but the prevalence of the student/consumer metaphor made it necessary.
- In the customer/retailer dynamic, the retailer provides what the customer wants, and research is performed to determine what those products are. In education, trained professionals with expertise (sometimes in conjunction with area employers) determine what the student needs. If we let students (as customers) determine the contents of our classes (as stores), we run the risk of damaging academic freedom AND the quality of course content.

There are cases in which the metaphor seems to make sense. We can think of our students as customers who want to shop at certain times of day or who are more likely to buy our educational products if the products are presented effectively; however, this metaphor is not necessary and does not add depth to the discussion.

We can, and should, use the terms STUDENT, TEACHER, SKILLS, TRAINING, and KNOWLEDGE. These terms still allow us to talk about the importance of meeting students' needs by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and training they need, when they need it, to make themselves marketable for the jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Metaphors make sense when they add depth to a discussion and ennoble something that might otherwise be overlooked; however, the student as customer metaphor forces us to struggle for the right words without conveying the wrong connotations; furthermore, it degrades something already noble and worthy. Do we really want to imply that learning is like buying? Do we really want to suggest that teaching is like selling? Do we really want to connect education with something as problematic as consumerism?

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**Judy Alleman, Nursing**  
**Clark College**

*Students as customers* is much too "economic" and, yes, I believe it would drive policy that dehumanizes us to human resources. Student-centered learning pedagogy, outcomes, etc. are much more philosophically focused on driving curriculum and instruction toward adult learning models.

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**Patricia Coulthard, Business**  
**Clark College**

Let's get with the current thinking in management. The evolving definition of customer is anyone that is affected by your work. Using this definition, we all have many customers, both internal and external to the college. One of the basic tenants of total quality management is to treat everyone we impact as customers and strive to meet and/or exceed customer needs. This principle has been shown repeatedly to lead to organizational excellence. Rather than cheapen our interactions with students, thinking of them as customers and providing Nordstrom-level service quality enriches these interactions.

If you would like, I can supply reference after reference supporting the concept of students as customers. Total Quality Management was a major component of my Ph.D. program in Systems Science: Business Administration. The basic principles apply to any organization.

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**Larry Weirather, English**  
**Clark College**

While I don't have time at present to go into the reasoning, the metaphor of students being customers is very dangerous as has been pointed out in many recent articles in both newspapers and academic journals. The whole idea of using the business model for education is as unsound as using the military model. We stand with our legs in many different fields or paradigms, not one--and besides,

we have our very own model that includes treating students and scholars and adults as students and scholars and adults. The rest of the world would do well to learn from us.

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***Paul Lecoq, Computer Science  
Spokane Falls Community College***

Call our students customers? A big mistake. It might have unfortunate consequences. Go to an administrative meeting anywhere in the state and you won't hear the term "student." They talk about "FTEs." We appear to be in the business of "FTE production." We worry about how many FTEs we will produce this quarter. We especially worry about whether we are above or below our FTE allotment. Referring to them as students would require a different mind-set. There is rarely a case above department meetings where one needs to admit that people are involved in what we do; just FTEs.

A Mafia hit man doesn't murder, he takes a contract. A crook doesn't steal, he lifts, he liberates, he acquires. A computer programmer doesn't admit to discovering a mistake he's made. He's just uncovered a "bug." Euphemisms are a neat way of avoiding personal contact or avoiding recognizing that we are dealing with people. It's easier to say our FTE production is down than to admit that we aren't attracting students as well as we have. It's more pleasant to deal in euphemisms than reality. After all, if we use the term student, someone might expect us to put the majority of our effort into teaching rather than bureaucracy.

Call our FTEs customers? Better for them, probably. But what will that kind of thinking do to our comfortable status quo?

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***John Lundy, Ph.D., Anthropology & Forensics Science  
Clark College***

I think we should get back to acting like part of an academic community and get away from all these business buzz words. We are not a business and should not act like one. They are STUDENTS, period. Our policies should be based on sound academic principles, not models from any other sector. There, you have my two cents worth.

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***Tony Wilson, Librarian  
Highline Community College***

Treat your students as customers? What a great idea! You would never have thought of it yourself, would you? It took someone from outside the classroom, a reformer or someone wanting a piece for himself – someone mentally equipped to turn a rather plain English word into an isolated buzz word, an instrument of one-ups-manship or downs-manship. While the business seminar performers may have a point in saying that it is a good idea to have the recipient pleased with your output (note the generality that allows for internal customers), it is a notion shallow enough that it can't sustain a whole workshop (or, rather, shouldn't be used to sustain a whole workshop). As a buzzword, however, it can be used to put you in your place, especially when used in such a way as to imply that it means something. A perfect situation arises whenever there is a matter of consternation in the teaching endeavor. The moment of consternation is the ideal time for that same interloper who came up with

this idea to say kindly, "Remember, the students are our customers." Your admonisher has just reduced your status relative both to himself and to your students and has made your concern subsidiary to the empty generic purpose of bureaucratic success. How could you be so recalcitrant?

The appropriate but cynical stance for teachers is to assume that this customer idea is just one more instance of being jerked around by people of the same mentality that brought us "multipurpose room" and "learning materials and media centers" to replace "cafeteria" and "library". Requiring their own buzzwords made them feel a little more important, made your perspective on your own needs a subset of their own intellectual edifice, and diluted a bit of your autonomy in meeting your own needs. A chip of your self-respect gets replaced with a chip of dependency.

On the other hand, what if "customer" were taken to designate a particular kind of relationship out of a range of possible relationships and what if we stayed within the bounds of standard English connotation? Let us examine a handful of words that provide some meaningful contrast in the implied patterns of reciprocity:

Customer	Your students are to you as you are to a clerk at Nordstrom. (We hope it is Nordstrom. It could be K-Mart. Or, we could just be asking if they'd like fries with their order.) Your student pays and walks out with an object. The student's competence with the object or its appropriateness to the student's goals is none of your business. The student, however, can get a refund.
Client	You do something to or for the students who may or may not understand it, but who agree to it and end up being and feeling better off because of it.
Patron	You produce paintings or poems or something worthwhile for the world, which the students pay for or subsidize, but may not personally receive.
Trainee or Coachee	You assist the student in reaching a mutually understood goal which is likely to have been set from outside.
Patient	You need only legal permission and/or blind obedience to do something to your students as patients, who may end up feeling or being better because of it.
Student	You are to seduce the students with your subject and make them different by the carnal experience of that subject. Often learning can be seen as a kind of contagion.
Colleague	You trust and respect someone in the doing and/or teaching of what you have taught. This is what your students become when you are very successful--when the students have caught the condition.

The buzzword-wielders, with their multipurpose rooms and learning centers and customers, have a common objective. In a pure educational process there are three primary entities: students, teachers, and the subject. The buzzword-makers call for reform. Reform itself is a buzzword. The buzzworders and reformers are almost all seeking major increases in the proportion of available resources spent on third parties. The near solitude of a healthy learning environment becomes a morass of learning teams, helping communities, continuous improvement, lifelong learning, and a search for excellence through expanded bureauliteracy. Education becomes ritual without inducing any change for the learner. The buzzworders demand obeisance to critical thinking even though, under their leadership, only a failure in critical thinking will lead to happy customers.

I think my students are students; not clients, patients, trainees, or customers.

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**Gary Parks**  
**English Shoreline Community College**

*I am interested in this topic, as I think the metaphor of student as customer is inaccurate and damaging in many ways. Ultimately, it is unnecessary as the term "student" exists and can include implications of customer-like expectations, etc. On the other hand, the term "customer" strips away several of the responsibilities associated with being a "student." It sidesteps the fact that students are paying for nothing more than an opportunity to work hard and learn under the guidance of a professional, and it*

*simplifies, if not banalizes, the fundamental type of interaction (it's not a "transaction," after all!) that occurs in a learning institution. A consumer model might in the future lead to a reduction of General Education requirements, or a re-ordering of requirements within courses--after all, what sane consumer would "buy" ten weeks of sometimes stressful exposure to content or skills that they aren't initially interested in?*

*This issue is an example of the proliferation of a marketing/business philosophy into areas where it doesn't belong and won't operate well. In terms of the top-level management and financial accounting of the college, business principles are necessary (though never as relevant as in a real business, and in an organizational sense I think they get less useful as you move closer to the academic units, where things often don't work like a business at all). Some business techniques, such as "customer service" training, might in an academic adaptation find limited use among staff who have more cursory interaction with students than do the faculty. But let's not lead our students astray with borrowed semantics. The "customer" model is not generally useful to describe interactions that occur between students and instructors; and, after all, the learning experience is by far the most extensive and significant experience the students will have at the college. Educational institutions already have in place terminology and processes to describe what goes on, and history shows they are flexible enough to accommodate changes and prevailing (trendy?) attitudes without transforming into something they're not. And as one of my colleagues said in a sidewalk conversation yesterday, "This is NOT a Sears Roebuck."*

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**Peter Melvoin, Sociology**  
**Bellevue Community College**

*OK, let's follow it out:  
If Students are Customers,  
then Courses are Commodities; and,  
Colleges are Shopping Malls;  
Faculty are Sales Staff;  
Deans are Mall Managers;  
Division Chairs are Store Managers;  
Program Chairs are Floor Managers;  
Academic Quarters are quadrennial Sales Events;  
And: The Customer is always right.*

*Where is Thorstein Veblen now  
that we need him?*

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**J.M. Simpson, History  
Pierce College**

*The metaphor of community and technical colleges as providers of services and the students as customers is very apt. Indeed, community and technical colleges ignore this dynamic at their peril.*

*A community college student who works full time came by early one evening to be advised before registering for classes. The person at the registration window told the student that she could not be advised, that there were already too many people signed up for advising, and that she would have to take time from her job to come back and register.*

*Not happy with the response, the student picked up a flyer, which stated that extra staff were available at such times to advise students prior to registering.*

*"Where are the extra advisors?" she asked. "If this is the way this college treats its customers, then it probably won't have any students registering."*

*The person at the registration window did not agree. "This college does not have customers."*

*If students are treated as though they are not customers, they will go elsewhere. The aforementioned student did.*

*It is commonly understood that community and technical colleges provide an array of educational and/or vocational products. These products, ranging from financial aid and advising to classes in ESL and dental hygiene, are offered by courteous, intelligent and well-versed staff and instructors. Like many good businesses, community and technical colleges are proud of what their faculty and staff do in presenting to the students the means by which they can learn from these educational and/or vocational experiences.*

*Students pay for this product; therefore, they are the customers. If a community or technical college consistently provides good customer service in line with its academic and vocational offerings, then students will pay to attend.*

*Furthermore, as students experience good educational and customer service at a community or technical college, local businesses will take note. For example, students who complete an academic or vocational program in a customer friendly and academically challenging environment are going to communicate that message to their employers. Businesses will be more apt to send employees to a community or technical colleges for training. The reason for this is clear – business people keenly understand the dynamic of good customer relations -- and so should community and technical colleges.*

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**Fran Collins, Developmental Education**  
**Clark College**

*While I would agree that college faculty are here to serve students, I believe that there are several aspects of education that do not at all match a business-customer model in which a business is an active provider to a customer who is a passive recipient of goods and services. In my opinion, optimal learning experiences come from faculty working in partnership with students. The students must be active participants in the learning process in order to receive maximum benefits. Interaction and cooperation with faculty and one another empower students to become independent learners and doers.*

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**George Darkenwald, Paralegal Program**  
**South Puget Sound Community College**

*Excellent idea. How often I've heard and often given what I consider excellent business advice: "The customer is always right."*

*Customers, clients, patients -- they not only grade us, they pay our rent, and it's a major mistake to forget that. And complaints about "customer" service, or lack of, multiply geometrically; compliments reach far fewer ears.*

*But my college professors and law professors, not to mention my flight instructors -- authority figures all and rightly so -- neither marketed to me nor solicited my critique.*

*Are knowledge and information, much less a love of learning and maybe a little wisdom, products we dispense and sell to consumers, or treasures we are privileged to share? Before I get too philosophical, one image from memory: the furious flight instructor cussing me as he grabbed the controls before I killed us both. Of course flight schools have to market too and be consumer friendly, or they'll go out of business. Enough for now.*

*Thanks for the pebble in the pond.*

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**Raymond Korpi**  
**English Clark College**

*Students are customers outside the classroom, but they are not customers when they are in the classroom. I am expected to do a good job as a faculty member, but I also must judge student performances, which is diametrically opposed to the salesperson-customer relationship. I do have to sell the students on my subject to keep them interested, but the ultimate responsibility for their education in the classroom is their own.*

*Now, when I put on a different hat, say advisor or tutor, then the students are my customers; and I want to do my absolute level best in answering their questions as I am NOT judging them at that point.*



Perhaps the most important way to think of it is that we would not have these reasonably well-paying jobs with reasonable benefits without students, but education is also the responsibility of the individual and the student must bear that burden. A customer does not have so much invested as a student.

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**Barbara L. Clinton, Speech**  
**Highline Community College**

Students are the customers. How many different times have we been told that? We hear it from administrators, faculty, and community members. I hear colleagues grumble about this metaphor while musing around the coffee pot, but I have no complaints with it--that is, so long as we extend the figure of speech to define just what business these customers patronize.

I have students who think this customer label gives them a "fast food" relationship to their education. I, as the teacher, become the short order cook. It is my job to sauté up the McNuggets of information, or worse yet of wisdom, slather them with a choice of enticing sauces, and keep them warm until the customer, almost unwittingly, gives in to hunger. I think not. My subject matter is recognized in the world of human relations to be worth too much, to be far too "gourmet," to be cannibalized in such a manner.

Other students succumb to the Nordstrom's model of education. They pay their money in exchange for a set of credits. In fact, if these credits don't wear well in the business world, students in some states are asking for refunds. Again, I think not. Education is not a pair of shoes to be walked on, found pinching, and returned almost un-used.

In my classroom I offer another version of this metaphor. My students are, indeed, customers. In fact, they are my own valued customers. But in my personal model they are the customers at my intellectual health club. Their tuition payment doesn't entitle them to nuggets of wisdom or the apparel of learning. All their tuition buys them is membership--membership in an elite club. No health club membership guarantees a person lower body fat or increased muscle mass. No health club promises a faster mile or a stronger swing. Instead, such membership, if it's a quality club, offers a wide array of equipment and vigilant supervision from a knowledgeable coach.

My intellectual health club is built on the same model. Payment buys a student's way into an elite atmosphere, resplendent with an array of equipment and a staff of skillful coaches. For those willing to come to our classes, use our library, computer lab, and tutoring centers, put in the time and accept the direction, the gain is immeasurable. These are my customers. I welcome them each class to my private gym, tell them that they are my customers and are lucky enough to have me as their personal trainer, and invite them to get ready to sweat.

I love my customers. And most of them seem to end up loving their coach.

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**Donna Roberge, Social Sciences  
Clark College**

*I think the customer metaphor does drive better policy and puts the interactive components in a model that delineates responsibilities and rights. It will place more accountability upon the institution's employees at all levels to meet the needs of the customer/clients. I would urge that we add what the accountabilities are for the student-customers as well, as this is, again, an interactive model. Sometimes in the larger society, the "customer is always right" may not be applicable across the board in an institution of higher learning.*

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**Nancy Elliott, Developmental English/ABE  
South Puget Sound Community College**

*Calling students customers makes about as much sense as calling patients in a hospital guests, and some hospitals are doing just that.*

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**James Newbill, History  
Yakima Valley College**

*Since some students may choose one college or another, most students expect a product, often tangible, for their tuition, and all pay money for the "product," one might use the commercial term "customer" to describe our students.*

*However, there are two basic differences between the commercial and the educational process that make "customer" inappropriate. One is related to the word, "product." The problem, at least in the Humanities, is that there is no tangible "thing" gained. For example, in contrast to courses in Police Science or Dental Hygiene or even English composition where specific goals and techniques are devised and, presumably, somewhat accurately measured, the goal of courses in literature, history, anthropology, and philosophy is not the mastery of an intricate body of material, (although "facts" are integral to the activity) but, rather, the developing of attitudes, of new, more sophisticated thinking techniques. One might say that practical, goal-oriented courses are often narrowing—one learns more and more about less and less—in order to earn more and more, while the liberal arts courses are aimed at breaking down our natural provincialism, so that one becomes less dogmatic, more willing to examine the many ideas and customs of others and other eras. But such valuable accomplishments cannot always be clearly seen, even by the teacher let alone by the student. Only the years of experience will reveal whether these "products" are being used. So, the Liberal Arts produce no "products," in the commercial sense. And, no products, no "customer."*

*The second weakness is that "customer" implies a significant knowledge on the part of the purchaser. Most people will pay some attention to the various aspects of the different \$35,000 automobiles before parting with that much cash. Even the simple expenditure of \$1.50 for a Baskin & Robbins ice cream cone is based on our experience with flavors and ice cream texture. We know what tastes good in ice cream. But, even though the new freshmen have had 12 years of education, that experience is so thin that they are virtually ignorant of what is involved in a college course, even in those academic fields with the same names as those taken in high school. Thus, they may expect history to be the memorization of facts or the recounting of some amusing anecdotes. Psychology is*

seen, not as a science, but as a subject dealing with bizarre personalities which appeal to voyeuristic inclinations. Philosophy might be expected to be unstructured bull-sessions, about the good or the bad. Such uninformed students could hardly be called "customers," at least not well-informed customers.

The point is that to treat the students as "customers" is to suggest (1) the wrong purposes for their college education, especially as related to the liberal arts courses, and (2) that these students rarely understand the intricacies of disciplines which have taken scholars many decades to explore. Sure, the student-customer should expect specific material in Introduction to Computers or College Algebra or Anatomy and Physiology, but students can never really be a customer in the usual sense of the word in that they have only the vaguest idea of the "product." Thus, the professional scholar/teacher has the obligation to lift the students above being mere materialistic "customers." They must be enticed, led, inspired, even propelled out of their commercial cave of shadows where everyone is too often blissfully contented with the narrow "customer mentality." Colleges, worthy of their Liberal Arts offerings, must not be reduced into using the terminology (and the philosophy) of the trade schools and business colleges. The latter have their legitimate roles. But colleges and universities must not attempt to duplicate them by treating their students simply as "customers."

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**Yvette O'Neill, Art/French**  
**Lower Columbia College**

*Home, Sick, with Gabriela Mistral*

Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga was born in Vicuna, Chile, in 1889. As a poet, she used the name Gabriela Mistral. She moved to the United States at the end of her life and lived near me in Roslyn when I was a child, but I didn't know of her then. I was focused on sidewalks, my ankles scabbed by pigeon toes in heavy shoes with sharp metal buckles, searching for the perfect chain laggard to throw into the perfect hopscotch square. Forty years later, looking through slatted blinds at cedars bowing to dark clouds over the Columbia River, I have stayed home from work to recover from marketing strategies, ungraded papers and a film about metaphor. I also have the flu. Nauseous, wrapped in a blanket, I sit all morning on the unsteady deck of poetry, warmed and chilled by Mistral's verse. I read for accuracy, looking for an explanation, not a cure.

I'm a college instructor in the state of Washington, and I make as much as the gal who cleans out the restrooms along the interstate highway. I'm not in this for the money. And neither are you. I don't care how current, catchy, and cunning it may be, I cannot call my students customers and what we do as teachers a product. Image and metaphor are important and this is not the Bon Marche. You will not find humanism in the profit margin and consumption for its own sake is not an art or a social science. Pius puritan prayers murmured to the god of wealth will not save our souls. But good literature will. That's what a prayer is, after all.

When Gabriela Mistral died, the president of Chile declared three days of mourning. American market analysts would no doubt find this a colossal waste of time and resources. American schools and colleges are the only American institution I can think of where someone like Mistral can be given time, can be important; the only institution where the pursuit of knowledge, the encouragement of creativity, and critical thinking are still valued for their own sake. This is something to treasure, something worth fighting for, to the end. Otherwise, Americans will have nothing to mourn in death, neither the poet nor the millionaire, only the passing of time.

*From a Teacher's Prayer*

## **Gabriela Mistral**

(1889-1957)

*Grant that I may be successful in molding one of my pupils into  
a perfect poem, and let me leave within her my deepest-felt melody that she may sing for you  
when my lips shall sing  
no more.*

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## **Michael Allan Moore, CADD/Engineering Yakima Valley College**

### *The Numbers game, WSCTC Style*

*"Les Affairs, c'est bien simple, c'est l'argent des autres." Alexander Dumas*

*(Or if your French is as bad as mine, I like this translation: "Business?  
It's quite simple. It's other people's money.")*

*How's your enrollment this quarter? FTE's up or down? How's the numbers? Excuse the lack of  
subject/verb agreement in the pithy street vernacular of the last sentence. But we've all heard these  
questions. They define the college experience today, in our state and across the nation.*

*By now it's obvious. Everyone involved knows colleges are de facto businesses which exist to make  
money. So it's almost natural, even logical, that we call students customers. Sure it's crass and  
mercenary. It's also reality.*

*Students are customers. How does this change the community college educational experience?  
Consider the following:*

- *Grade Inflation, an epidemic long since out of control.*
- *An ever-widening administration/faculty dichotomy. Dichotomy? Come on, it's an abyss, an  
academic Grand Canyon.*
- *Accountability mania, e.g., accreditation here, there and everywhere. In the process, create  
mountains of paper no one reads. While we're at it, let's PIU check everyone, even if they've  
got the brains and background of a Madame Curie or Einstein.*
- *Faculty as marketers, selling their wares.*
- *Bottom line hysteria: Eliminate full-time tenured faculty. Replace them with part-timers. Tear  
down the Ivory Tower. Save a buck.*

*Profit motive has permeated every sector of the community college experience. You can't escape  
this; it's everywhere. I received a have-a-good-summer memo from my boss recently, and I did  
appreciate the cordial message. But the thrust of the letter was that the boss hoped my marketing  
efforts for my academic program were coming on strong. And I better get plenty of warm bodies into  
my classroom this fall. If not, my program will be terminated. Have a nice summer.*

*Let me tell you about one professor here at our college. He used to buy his own advertising to market  
his academic program. I mean he paid for it out of his own pocket. I admired his will to survive. But I  
loathed a system that brought this about and allowed it to happen.*

*Al Shanker was a good man, a great educator, and also a fine writer. My favorite Shanker essay is "Competing for Customers" (AFT Sept., 1993). He was writing about grade inflation, and how it represented a total erosion of our academic standards. In his essay, he quoted a Wall Street Journal article (June 8, 1993) by Dr. William Maesen:*

*"Alas, the maverick professor toiling to salvage competent academic standards may find students who vote with their feet and avoid his classes or opt for less demanding teachers. Lower enrollments can readily qualify that teacher for nonrenewal of contract."*

*Could it be that some of our best teachers, those with standards, are not the most popular with their student-customers? Therefore, those teachers have low enrollments. Therefore, they get fired. Reductio ad absurdum.*

*The students-are-customers metaphor is severely damaging, if not destroying, the process of education. In its essence that process, going back to the roots of civilization, centers on the teacher-student relationship, the transfer of knowledge and skills, of experience and wisdom, from one person to another. This can and should be, by its very nature, noble and idealistic.*

*Sure, free-market competition forces us to respond to what our customers want. But should higher education be part of this market? Is education a business?*

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**Doug Morrison, Business  
Clark College**

The notion of a customer as someone that Clark must compete for, retain, and serve well in order to earn revenue (reimbursement) is legitimate to the extent that colleges place a high priority on revenue enhancement (FTE student growth rather than student success).

The concept that education is a commodity (rather than a process of individual transformation and growth) and that students are customers (rather than seekers or learners) rightfully offends many educators.

I have been at Clark College for the past 22 years, and in my opinion, the first definition fits our past and present situation very well.

**Keith Stansbury, Engineering  
Clark College**

From the American Dictionary: Customer--one accustomed to frequent a certain place of business: a buyer.

Do the students pay money for (buy) services performed by Clark College personnel? Yes. Do students frequent the campus or other Clark facilities? Yes. Thus, Clark students certainly are customers of Clark College.

While Clark "serves" the entire community, it is only the students who pay for services rendered; thus they are "customers." Clark needs to integrate the needs of students and local business, but it is the students who are strictly our "customers."

I believe the question of considering "the concept of students as 'customers'" makes as much sense as considering the concept of a car as a vehicle.

I believe that not considering students as customers to be problematic, and will lead to misguided policy and flawed decision making.

**Colette Morse, Computer Science  
Clark College**

This subject is quite near and dear to my heart. I have a student, who perceived himself a customer, who is STILL hounding me three years after a grade dispute which WAS RESOLVED to his satisfaction. He's not the norm, by any means. However, we had some discussions about how he was a customer, and I was not providing good customer service. I think customer service is valid in the sense that we do work hard, go to class prepared, set high standards with fair and impartial grading, etc. However, the student doesn't drive the system when it comes to "the customer being right" and "paying for the service, and therefore has input to the level of service we provide SIMPLY BECAUSE HE/SHE pays for the education." I think the student should have input and does have that opportunity through the evaluation process as well as the grievance procedures. However, I don't refer to my students as customers, ever. They are students. In no way do I perceive them to drive the educational process as I expect a customer will do in the commercial world.

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**George B. Leighton, Ph.D., English  
Bellevue Community College**

*We do a great disservice to everyone when we refer to students as "customers." Schools are not "businesses": If we were, we could dump our outdated technology tomorrow, take a big tax write-off, and buy state-of-the-art equipment and software. Our students are not "customers": If they were, we could make no demands of them whatsoever, for customers are passive receivers of goods, not active participants in a process of discovery and learning.*

*When we make students customers, we disempower them. We say, in effect, "You have no active role in the educational process. Sit back, and we will do all the work for you. You need do nothing but pay us--you don't even have to come to class. Your check will guarantee you a product: learning. You, the customer, will learn in proportion to the figure on your check. We guarantee it!" This way of thinking devalues all that good educational institutions should stand for--the culture of meaning that makes possible the fully lived, richly examined life--and reduces learning, that most rewarding of all processes, to a mere "product."*

*To become better citizens, students must take responsibility for their own learning; if they don't, nothing of significance will happen in the development of their civic consciousness during their time at school. When we read about those young people who remain passive and detached or who commit senseless acts of violence without owning the consequences of their actions, we need to ask ourselves what we as educators have done to help them see that they have a role in their own future.*

*Finally, the notion that students pay us to be their personal servants each quarter fuels the growing lack of civility we are experiencing in our classrooms. If you are dissatisfied with the "product" or "service," why not throw a tantrum and call the "vendor" names? Why not leave the cell phone on in class? After all, you're paying the bill. You're the "customer"--and the customer is always right.*

*The metaphor of school as business and student as customer is dead wrong. It's exactly the value we shouldn't be "selling" to students. Legislators, administrators, and sleazy educational "marketers" should know better. Let's throw out this metaphor before it destroys that which we cherish most: the cultivation of mind and spirit.*

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**Crystal Ashley-duVerglas, ABE/ESL**  
**South Puget Sound Community College**

*When I was in graduate school, I was appalled by the laziness among faculty and how deep the teaching ruts around them had become. Their feet-on-the-table, dog-eared lecture folders and indifference to our wonderful mix of students as a resource was ghastly to me.*

*Every evening coffee break would find me on my soap box: "We are consumers!" I cried to my classmates, tired from their day jobs and a long commute. "We are learning to be educators, yet our models are boring us to death! If this were a product, you'd return it! If your kids were receiving this, you'd protest!"*

*"Quiet, Crystal. Just let us get the 'union card,'" they glumly retorted. "All we want is the degree."*

*My use of the metaphor was lost on them. But it has spurred me to greater excellence ever since.*

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**Julie Falanga, English**  
**Spokane Community College**

*In her novel Moo, about campus life at a large mid-western state university, Jane Smiley has the professor of economics, whose primary function is to attract major research contract dollars, consistently refer to the students as "the customers." The appearance of this term, sprinkled throughout his dialogue, is jarring in its matter-of-factness. What makes the term so incongruous is that the rest of the novel is peopled with a variety of professors, students, and even a prize hog, each with his or her own agenda which has nothing to do with profit and loss to the university.*

*Behind the "customer" epithet, of course, is a way of thinking and a modus operandi that until recently have been confined to the for-profit corporation. But over the last fifteen to twenty years, the corporatization of universities has quietly and inexorably taken over. The new corporate model says that higher education is no longer to be imbued with the spirit of free inquiry and administered by a community of scholars interested in celebrating the life of the mind and, ultimately, in educating the whole person. The new corporate model says that higher education is, instead, a "product" which is "manufactured" at the "factory" (the college or university), which is administered by executives, and "sold" (for tuition) to a "customer" (the student) who can then take the product into the marketplace, where it has a negotiable value like any other commodity, irrespective of the actual education that might have taken place.*

*A close review of this new corporate model exposes several obvious fallacies. First, education in general and higher education in particular are open-ended pursuits in which the outcome cannot be controlled, much less measured with any precision. The degree or diploma that is conferred at the end of a successful program bears no guarantee other than that the graduate attended class often enough and did enough work to receive a passing grade. In all this the most important variable are the students themselves, who must actively participate in the co-creation of this "product."*

*Second, the corporate view of education-as-product implies a money-back guarantee, something which education by definition cannot offer. The Latin educere, from which "education" is derived, possesses many nuances of meaning. The most obvious sense of "to lead out" is that of developing the human being from the inside out, bringing out the talent and intellectual capacity in the individual*

*which, without education, will remain only latent and undeveloped. The second sense of "to lead out" is to lead the individual out of the comfort zone of mental habit, into the larger world of facts and ideas which have been at most a kind of background hum generated by "the world out there," having nothing to do with "me." Education in these senses equip the individual with the capacity and curiosity to encounter the world and benefit from the meeting. In light of the above, what would be the "product?" What would provide the "guarantee?"*

*The final fallacy of the corporate approach to education lies in the notion of "student-as-customer." Nevertheless, if the "student-as-customer" model is rigorously applied, the student will still expect some sort of guarantee in return for his or her expenditure of effort. Not only does the student expect a consistent "product," but the equation is often made between the cost and the quality of the "product." In many students' minds, the "product" boils down to the degree, or the GPA received for the course. The student has "bought" the "product," and needs that "product" to conduct future transactions such as landing the job of his or her dreams. "Product consistency" is often seen as a predictable "A" rolling off the assembly line of a "good school" to match all the other ones the way one buys clothes from a particular mail order catalog noted for its distinctive "look." In exchange for money handed over, the student feels entitled to expect a certain outcome.*

*In our mass-produced, throwaway culture, the ordinary student buys higher education like a loaf of bread: pricey or cheap, full of flavor and texture or bland and unchallenging, the product must meet expectations. Perhaps only the extraordinary student sees him- or herself as the "product" which must participate in its own creation, and for which there are no guarantees beyond the gamble that a proactive attitude, a voraciously curious and alert mind, and willingness to get down and dirty with the material at hand will ultimately pay off in a life worth living.*

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**Denise Vaughan, Political Science  
North Seattle Community College**

*The concept of a student as a customer is both accurate and misleading. Students do pay to go to school. In this sense it is clearly an exchange relationship. Students provide the basic capital to run the institution and are much of the monetary foundation for the college. Our primary customer, however, is the state and not the student. Much of the funding for public institutions comes from the public, from legislative expenditures, and from state and federal development grants. This is not to suggest that students are insignificant. On the contrary, students are the critical element of our profession.*

*This is where the analogy of the student as customer is most salient. The students are why the college exists. Whether the state, the federal government, the taxpayer, or the students themselves pay for their education, the students' overall benefit is why the university system exists. The student should not be seen as a passive vessel to be filled with four years of empty lectures and mindless assignments. Rather, we are reminded by the student as customer analogy that the student is an integral and active participant in the education process. The student provides as well as receives.*

*Where the analogy is weakest is the implication of a retail-type relationship between the institution and the student. While the student is a customer of the service the college provides, the college is not a retail establishment, designed to provide a finished product.*

*What we sell is an interactive experience that demands as much from its customer as from its distributor. As educators our job is not to provide students with a piece of paper that says that they can do a job, but with the tools to adapt to a wide variety of life experiences. Providing the tools for a*



specific function is not enough. That is not education. An education should provide the student with a base on which to build a career and the basis of their interaction with other citizens.

The portrait of students as customers can also divide the goals of the institution from the goals of the faculty. From an administrative perspective, students are the basis for the funding of the institution and the single most permeable source of funding. The academic goals of the institution, providing the best available academic resources, the broadest education, and a well rounded, student-centered learning environment, however, should not be ignored. As an institution, we do ourselves a disservice by dividing the goals of our academics and our administrators.

The concept of students as customers encourages the larger college environment to see ourselves as providing tools to our students to enable them to compete in a changing world. In this way the analogy of students as customers is highly functional. If, however, we see students as passive recipients of information, as engaged in a simple exchange relationship that involves money for a diploma or a certificate, then our educational prerogatives need to be re-examined.

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**Barbara Simpson, Speech**  
**Clark College**

*I wanted to comment on the idea of "students as customers." For what it is worth, this idea truly bothers me because occasionally I have encountered a student who believes that because he or she "paid" for a course, he or she is entitled, at the very least, to a passing grade. I had a young student a couple of years ago who earned a "D" as a grade . . . . The points she accumulated fell into that category. She felt that because she was in class and participated in discussion and enjoyed the class that she deserved a "C." It did not seem to matter that she failed every quiz, earned a D on the midterm, failed the final, and turned in less than satisfactory papers. When she asked for my recommendation, I suggested that she re-take the course. She balked saying, "I've already paid for this class!"*

*What students "pay" for is the opportunity to learn, challenge themselves, and be mentored by excellent educators. The idea of students as "customers" sets up institutions of higher learning to be no more than the diploma mills that are occasionally exposed on 60 Minutes. Students should certainly expect that their tuition dollars would provide quality teachers and courses (we already provide checks and balances to see that is the case), and perhaps certain student services. I believe we are already encouraging a high sense of entitlement among students with the substantial grade inflation that is present even on this campus. A "C" is seen by too many students as a punitive or unsatisfactory/unacceptable grade.*

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**Carolyn P. Bilby, French/Foreign Language**  
**Bellevue Community College**

*It's not a complete surprise that students are being called customers. In the early seventies, I was told that teachers were salesmen. I was insulted. Businessmen in those times were associated with a lack of moral values and polluted legacies such as the Love Canal in Upstate New York. I wanted students to discover the joy of learning, to make them life-long learners, to give them something that no one could ever take away.*

*Unfortunately, our culture has gone to bed with business. Politicians are reading books written by successful businessmen who claim they know how to fix education. Certain college presidents are even calling themselves CEOs. Accountability and productivity have replaced teaching and learning as core values. Calling the student a customer, as well as applying other business terms such as customer service and productivity, cheapen education and often have bizarre ramifications. A colleague and I were told one spring quarter that we were not productive, based on the numbers of students in our classes. We teach Foreign Language. Small classes are best for that type of learning. Unfortunately numbers rule. Students are now asking for refunds for things such as teachers deviating from their proposed calendars of assignments and changes in staffing. They complain that they actually have to attend classes. They are starting to behave like rude customers in a country that caters to customers' requests. Educational institutions are not Nordstroms. You cannot wear the dress to the prom and then return it, claiming it doesn't fit. Students need to take responsibility for their learning, to work with faculty and staff in a courteous manner to have their needs met, of course. Yet they should understand that unlike customers, they don't always know what their needs are.*

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**Carol Hill, Nursing**  
**Clark College**

*While I believe we need to look at accessibility of education in terms of meeting students' needs, knowing that most work part-time and many have family responsibilities, I do not believe the "customer" concept is a useful word in terms of the quality of academic work.*

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**Kathy Bobula, Early Childhood Education**  
**Psychology Clark College**

*I think this has both good and bad outcomes or implications. Seeing students as customers might drive the college to re-think how we schedule or "package" classes with more innovative time frames (away from the 1 hour per day - 5 days per week for 10 weeks) that suit student life-styles better. I think this would be a positive move.*

*The down side is that the "customer" approach to curriculum and standards could water down the quality of the education and training that students receive.*

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**Don Appert, Music**  
**Clark College**

*Would you like some fries with that? Please !!!!! This is not an an appropriate concept IMHO.*

*IMHO = In my humble opinion*

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**Roger Baker, Art  
Clark College**

*Students are customers, of course, but I think it more useful to think of society at large as the principle customer. We're concerned more about service to society than to individual students.*

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**Judy Eng Woo, Ph. D., Business  
Bellevue Community College**

*Viewing the work of education as "business" and students as "customers" was originally part of a perspective to encourage the re-examination of structure, organization, and design of education. Like many "new" models in organizational design and development, the concepts were developed with industrial businesses in mind. Any change is a welcome means to rejuvenate and refresh people and their interest in their work.*

*Like all innovative and thoughtful models, the farther we move away from the original thought, dilution and incremental slogans take over. You remember how a huge body of management research was consolidated into the slender, top seller "One-Minute Manager" which later evolved to the "One-Minute Parent" (!) and other such mutations. We've forgotten (or perhaps some of us never knew) the depth of thought and reflection that built and developed these models.*

*The business terms are the sound bites of a much larger and older body of research and thought. The notion of "students as customers" is the current, simplistic iteration and . . . outdated. If you review broadly, the literature about the transformation of organizations, thought, and people (e.g., Senge, Wheatley, etc.), the discussions have evolved to terms such as "organic systems and design," "chaos theory," quantum physics, epidemiology, etc., a far cry from the idiom of customers, business, products, deliverables and service.*

*Still, here we are, stuck with the "business" and "customer" phrasing. We have to get past this period. How?*

*One way: embrace it! And make it ours! Take the opportunity for a "learning" moment to open thinking about organization design, responsiveness, and transformation. Education and learning ARE about transformation.*

*Seize the chance! When these phrases pop up, ask the student how he/she is using those words and how do the words fit? As educators and academics, we tend to ponder these ideas with each other but not with students, business persons, or legislators. They really don't know what educators "do."*

*Another way: open the discussion, engage, and counter.*

*One faculty member has used the analogy of physicians or personal exercise trainers. Parts of these "roles" are more accurate than the superficial customer analogy. Physicians or personal trainers diagnose, analyze, and tell you things you don't necessarily want to hear. They plan a course of action, treatment, or exercise in which you have to participate in order to be successful. Because of pre-existing conditions, results are not guaranteed even if you do participate. They challenge you to become or do something different. They tell you it takes time. All of these characteristics are true of learning and education.*

Finally, don't let the semantics create inertia or dissipate the passion for learning and interest in students' learning. Ultimately we're all better off for having pursued a discourse of different perspectives.

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**Peggy Hartsell, Ph.D., Physics**  
**Clark College**

*I think as soon as you start looking at the student-as-customer, you will be in deep trouble. This brings up ideas such as "the customer is always right." This is not conducive to learning. I have had unpleasant students demand that I make things very easy for them to get through a physics class because "I pay your salary!!". Student-as-customer is just a step away from student-as-boss.*

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**Joseph Hull, Physical Science**  
**Seattle Central Community College**

*Have It Our Way*

**College:** *Welcome to McCampus, may I take your order?*

**Student:** *I'd like a 3.1 in Chemistry 110, a passing grade in English 103, and 5 credits of foreign language. And hold the afternoon classes, please. I have to work.*

**College:** *Good choice, the General Distribution Requirement Big Burp Classic! That will be a 1.3 in Chemistry 101, English 103 in the afternoon, and 5 credits of foreign language. Can I SuperSize that foreign language to 10 credits for you? It's only \$499 extra this week only at McCampus!*

**Student:** *No way! I can barely afford this place already!*

**College:** *And what kind of foreign language will you be having? As you can see, we have the biggest menu of any McCampus in the region!*

**Student:** *Whatever! Just give me one that's not cold and dried out.*

**College:** *All of our courses are fresh and piping hot at McCampus!*

**Student:** *Yeah, right! The last time I was here I picked Introductory Swedish, and it was really poorly prepared, and I got halfway through it; and it made me so ill, I just walked away without finishing it.*

**College:** *Oh, I'm sorry to hear that you were not 100% satisfied with your McLanguage Meal. You'll be happy to know that we fired that particular course preparer and have replaced him with special technologies that will keep all our courses fresh and hot at McCampus!*

**Student:** *Wait a minute! Is this going to raise the price again?*

**College:** *I'm sorry, we WILL have to pass on the costs to our valued customers, but once you've tried our New Improved Enhanced McLanguage, you'll agree that by eliminating the human element and*

offering them on-line, we've ensured that no matter what your choice, every course will taste exactly the same!

**Student:** Whatever!! Can I just have my order? I'm running behind here.

**College:** I'm sorry to keep you waiting! That will be \$4,968.53.

**Student:** Hey, I ordered a 3.1 in Chem 110, not a 1.3 in Chem 101!

**College:** I'm sorry, but Chem 110 is not part of the Big Burp Classic. But you can make a single substitution for \$499 this week only at McCampus!

**Student:** No way, that's way overpriced!!

**College:** I'm sorry that you can't afford the Big Burp Classic! Perhaps you could SmallSize your order! Try our 2 Credit Combo for only \$499 this week only at McCampus!

**Student:** Forget it! I'm outta here! I don't know why I keep coming back to this place!

**College:** Thank you for coming to McCampus, and have a nice day!

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### **Lotus, Carpentry Green River Community College**

*While I appreciate the pitfalls of considering students "customers" in the classroom, I think that to the institution, students are customers. Good customer service should be at the top of our institutional goals.*

*When classes are canceled, what happens to the students? As far as I know, they are sent over to registration or to the telephone to try to scramble for the few remaining seats in classes they need. They do not have any kind of priority because their classes have been canceled. They are competing for spaces with each other and with late registering students.*

*I have three students this quarter who are planning to graduate in June, each of whom had one of their required classes canceled. In one case, there was no other section of the class. For the other two students, the other section was full. With the help of other instructors and a dean, my colleague and I were able to get them the classes they need, and they will graduate when they planned.*

*How many students does this happen to? How many are going to school one extra quarter as a result? This is the kind of bureaucratic delay to graduation that our speaker last week was warning against. If we must cancel classes, we need to serve the students better in the process. No business that treats its customers in this way can expect to continue in business.*

*Do I like considering the college a business? Well, yes and no. I think it is a useful analogy, but it is only an analogy. Unlike most businesses, a school has missions that are value-laden. Our money comes from taxpayers, who have those missions in mind. If we do not remain true to our missions, there is little reason for us to continue to exist, whether or not we are "making" money. We need to be concerned with the bottom line, but only in relation to our missions.*

*Another example of potentially poor customer service: a colleague described some of the things her division is doing in order to be more cost-effective. Some of those disturbed me. Should we really be cutting the second year of foreign language instruction? If we must cut one or two languages, by all means keep the third! I understand other divisions are making similar cuts --including mine, and that second-year courses are having a hard time running. This may make sense for the short-term budget, but is it good customer service? Is it even good business? Will students keep coming if all we offer is first-year courses? If they do come, are we honestly meeting our responsibility to educate them?*

*These are just two examples among many possible areas for discussion. If we want to be a strong, healthy institution, we need to balance the demands of the budget with the needs of our customers, our academic or vocational disciplines, our administration, faculty, and staff, and our greater community. If we divide ourselves into smaller and smaller competing units, we will fail. If we alienate our customers, we will fail. Let's make sure everyone is talking and everyone is represented at the table.*

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**Andrew Jeffery, Philosophy**  
**Green River Community College**

*I think Lotus understates the pitfalls of the "student-as-customer" analogy. Let's go for a whole service industry allegory, and if students are to be considered customers, then the taxpayers are our stockholders to whom we are also accountable, if not more so. What are the taxpayers paying for, when we ask for their investment? Our product is the accredited graduate. Unfortunately, current upper management's emphasis on assembly-line efficiency (read FTEs) sacrifices product quality for quantity.*