

## **Right about Student Rights?**

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### **Abstract**

A student goes to a student center at a university to make an inquiry and request information about a degree. The student's request is not dealt with, because of the staff's attitude and services, which are not professional. Overall, the student feels disappointed with the response of the student center. What kind of customer service should be provided to students and how could university management improve its service?

*Key words:* dissatisfaction; frontline employees' attitude; inquiries; customer service

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### **Story**

After my last lecture I headed to the student center to ask about a few things relating to my GPA, employment skills module, and degree planning. As my last lecture finished early, I arrived at the student center at 3:40pm, well before the office closed at 4pm. When I arrived, another student was ahead of me in line, and so I waited patiently until the receptionist was ready to see me.

I began the enquiry by asking about the employment skills module. I stated, "about the employment skills module, I want to sign up and..." The receptionist abruptly interrupted me and said, "Yes, we have sent you an email about it." I was not pleased, as I had not yet finished my sentence. I pulled out my laptop from my backpack and continued, "Yes I got that email and I saw the message." I opened the webpage to where I needed to confirm it was the correct place for registration and showed it to the receptionist. I then asked, "Is this the page where I can sign up for the workshop?" The receptionist looked confused and browsed it for a minute or two before confirming that it was the right page.

"Is there a GPA system in our university?," I asked her. The receptionist responded very quickly, "Why do you need to know that? What for?," I had received no information and felt it was impolite that she answered my question with another question. I answered, "Because I am thinking about transferring to another

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university.” She said, “Yes, then you will need that. You have a student handbook. It is in there somewhere, and it will show you the GPA.”

I opened my handbook and asked her on which page I could find that information. She looked at me doubtfully and opened her handbook unwillingly, looking coldly at me. We turned over some pages for a few minutes. During that time, she kept repeating, “It should be here somewhere.” I gave up on looking earlier than she did, because I was getting tired of trying to locate information that she could not find.

Around this time, a lady came out of the office. She was the student adviser who had helped me to design my degree plan. The adviser handed some papers, which I believed belonged to the female student who preceded me, to the receptionist and asked, “Where is she?” The receptionist responded by shaking her head and rolling her eyes. “I don’t know, I told her to wait. It’s okay; doesn’t matter if she isn’t here, ‘cos it’s not our problem if she isn’t here.” I waited for them to finish the rest of their conversation and went up to talk to the adviser about my degree plan. “Could you help me to take a look at my degree plan?,” I asked cautiously. “No, I am about to leave now, come back tomorrow,” she responded firmly. The time now was around 3:45pm. “But I just need you to take a look at it, it won’t take long,” I begged. “Sorry, come back tomorrow,” she said decisively. The adviser turned and made her way back to the office.

I looked at the receptionist as she looked at me. We both waited for a moment before I said to her, “So about my GPA?” She insisted that I could find the information I needed in the student handbook. However, I did not believe what she said, and so I insisted that she give me what I had asked for in the first place – my GPA or a formula that I could use to calculate it. She went to the printer and took a piece of paper, which was apparently my academic record, showing my grades. She explained, “This is your grades, and you can use it to calculate your GPA.” I responded, “Yes, but how?” She continued, “For example, you got a B+, which is equivalent to maybe a score of 75 to 80? Or 80 to 85, and you use this to calculate your GPA.” I was speechless, because that still did not give me what I wanted. “Okay, could you ask someone to help calculate the GPA for me?,” I asked. She rested my record on the desk next to the girl student’s and said, “Yes, come back tomorrow.” I looked at her doubtfully and asked, “Don’t you want to put a note on my paper, so they will know what to do?” She replied, “Yes I will.” I looked at her and waited for her to write the note, but she just stared back at me. She said, “Now excuse me, I want to serve those people behind you.” I looked back, saw three people in line behind me, and then looked back at the receptionist, speechlessly. I packed my laptop into my backpack and walked away. Even when I glanced back, I did not see her writing a note.

### **Outcomes**

Select (✓) one of the following outcomes/solutions to the trade talk case study.

- A. The student center should continue operating under its present system. It is not necessary to change, because this seems to be the natural course of things.
- B. The staff member should have apologized for not being able to help at that moment and suggested to the student to come back the next day so that she could look into the requests more thoroughly. This would allow the staff member to provide more accurate information.
- C. The staff should provide all the information that they can collect and ask the student to find the answers himself.
- D. The staff should transfer the student's issues to other department(s) and consider the problem to be satisfactorily resolved.
- E. The management of the university should be aware of the current state of the office and address it by designing a new code of conduct and implementing training for the staff.

### **Surface Assessment**

The staff at the student center offered poor customer service to the student. The student felt unwelcome, and his requests were unresolved due to a lack of knowledge and concern from the staff. The interactions and ambience appeared to be normal for both staff and students based on how the office seemed to be operating. The uncaring atmosphere appeared to be the normal culture within the office. If students want anything, they visit the student center, because there are no other alternatives. The student center receives visits from students continuously, but some students' perceptions of the center will be negative as a result of such poor service and uncaring treatment.

### **Deep Assessment**

The student felt that the services provided by the student center showed a lack of concern and compassion. The student center is the only place within the university that students can obtain various types of information (for example, collecting their assessment results). The student center seems to not feel the need to appeal to students since it is the only such service provider within the university. Students have no choice, but to visit the center. The center's poor customer service and attitude were demonstrated by the fact that the student's request about degree plan assistance did not concern the staff member; she told him to come back the next day, because she was getting ready to leave before her official finishing time. The staff showed themselves to be unprofessional and failed to recognize the customer's needs.

The receptionist's inability to answer the student's GPA question and continued provision of irrelevant answers were signs of lack of knowledge. This demonstrated a greater degree of unprofessionalism and negatively influenced the student's perception of the student center's capabilities.

Due to the monopoly position of the center in the marketplace (university), its

service providers can be condescending and unpleasant, because in reality the customers have no alternative. As shown in the story above, when the receptionist rolled her eyes about the previous female student and used unfriendly language, the staff displayed an arrogant attitude. Students might feel insignificant when they visit the student center, based on the attitude of the staff. The impatient gestures and poor attitudes displayed by the receptionist and adviser will be absorbed by the students (Solomon et al., 2013). Behaviour such as talking about the previous female student impolitely, driving a student away to attend to other customers, and ignoring valid requests will affect the way students view the center. The customer services this student witnessed planted a bad image of the student center in his mind.

The current environment in the student center indicates failed management and a loss of customer focus. The center's management must develop a new set of rules of conduct and training plans for employees; a deeper understanding of customers will allow the staff to become more "customer-centered" (Sain et al., 2014).

### **Multiple Choices**

A. The student center should continue operating under its present system. No change is necessary, because this seems to be the natural course of things.

0 points; this option violates the practices of good customer service. Students derive no real satisfaction from the student center, because the norms and cultures within the office are not customer-oriented. If the cultures and norms in the office do not change to provide a greater customer focus, then the problems in the office will persist and worsen.

B. The staff member should have apologized for not being able to help at that moment and suggested to the student to come back the next day so that she could look into the requests more thoroughly. This allows the staff to provide more accurate information.

1 point; this option shows goodwill on behalf of the staff member. Although the student's request cannot be fulfilled at that moment, it shows the staff member is willing to investigate the matter more thoroughly. Moreover, apologies from the staff would be more acceptable and would make the student feel respected and valued. However, this option is not the fundamental solution for the problems within the office.

C. The staff should provide all the information that they can collect and ask the student to deal with the problem himself.

0 points; this option appears to be asking students to solve their own problems. What the students need is apparently unimportant to the student center. Again, this could create a negative image of the student center.

D. The staff should transfer the student's problem to other department(s) and consider the issue satisfactorily resolved.

0 points; not only does this option fail to address the problem, but it can also cause an unpleasant ambience, indicating the student center has no concern for students' problems and is shifting its responsibility to other departments.

E. The management of the university should be aware of the current state of the office and address it by designing a new code of conduct and implementing training for the staff. 9 points; this option addresses the fundamental level of the problem. The fundamental problem is the improper culture and norms within the student center; management has the power to assess, evaluate, design, improve, and implement these core issues. The management can alter the current situation by developing a plan that involves constant improvement and which can change the current norms and culture in the student center. The philosophy behind an organization is what leads to its success, and that involves its spirit as well as the norms and culture within it. For instance, the reason why Japanese firms offer impeccable customer services is that they value the Japanese concept of kaizen (constant improvement) (Peller & Beimes, 2015). Only management can introduce such a philosophy into an organization.

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### Editorial Commentary

As an important comment for educators, administrators, and professional trainers, please note that this student's story clearly implies that he, along with probably the vast majority of students, sees himself as a customer of the learning institution he has signed up to attend. Students are not merely protégés or charges to be commanded as the "controllers" wish; rather, they are, at a minimum, co-creators of the value offering (future-fast education and employability), and at best they are sophisticated customers with demands and the money (even under study loans) to back up that demand. The single (rather lonely) aspect allocated to answer B provides some implicit evidence of this standpoint.

Educational institutions (EIs) would do well to recognize that their front-line staff members, like those in the hospitality industry and retail, are the shop-window of their organization. These university representatives (student consultants, student liaison officers, advisors, and student councilors) play an important role in "living" the strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Silzer & Dowel, 2009) and brand attributes of the organization (Bonoma, 1984; Gray 2006; Hurrell & Scholarios, 2014; Kimpakorn, & Tocquer, 2010). EIs often rely heavily on the research output and teaching capabilities of academic staff to build up their desired brand reputation and

to establish sustainable competitive advantages (Berry & Parasuraman 2004; Shamma & Hassan, 2013) through distinctive competencies and differential benefits. This student's tale clearly illustrates the impact of administrative and front-line staff on students' perceptions of openness, conscientiousness, responsiveness, and innovation – in other words, whether they see the institution as “a great place to study”.

Some quick advice from experts in this field of customer care:

- Provide extensive training for front-line staff, not only in product knowledge, but also in dealing with tough decisions, complex issues, and customer dilemmas.
- Make sure senior staff with the authority and responsibility to make instantaneous decisions are readily accessible in front-line areas and SBUs.
- Train staff to provide genuine assistance and to take charge of solving customers' problems until they are fully resolved – not to simply “pass the responsibility elsewhere.”

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