

Niamh A. McGuigan. A Critique of the Student as Customer Metaphor in Higher Education and Academic Libraries. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. July, 2005. 33 pages. Advisor: David Carr

This paper describes a critique of the trend in higher education and academic libraries to refer to students and library patrons as customers. A survey of education and library literature was conducted to trace the development of this metaphor, particularly in relation to the use of Total Quality Management in higher education. Issues examined in this paper include the role of metaphors, the applicability of business terminology and concepts to education and libraries, the effects of commodification of information and education, and the influence the student/patron as customer metaphor has on information literacy instruction. This paper concludes that usage of the student/patron as customer metaphor indicates an inability to comprehend the role of the student or library patron, and that, by continuing to refer to college students and library patrons as customers, we contribute to the sense that education, research, and access to library services are irrelevant in today's world.

**Headings:**

Total quality management

College and university libraries -- Evaluation

Library science literature -- Evaluation

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Terminology -- Evaluation

A CRITIQUE OF THE STUDENT AS CUSTOMER METAPHOR IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

by  
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## **I. Introduction**

In our era of budget cuts and layoffs, there has been much discussion of the financial threats to higher education and to libraries in particular. Since the early 1990s, libraries and higher education have focused their attention on borrowing management techniques from the corporate sector as a means for overcoming financial difficulties and justifying requests for further funding. One of the most significant ideas imported from the corporate world is the focus on identifying customers and providing quality service to those customers. This new way of thinking has led to the rise of the metaphor of the student as customer in both higher education and academic libraries. In a society where market forces influence so many aspects of our lives, it is important to explore the reasons that we have come to think of students as customers, and to determine the consequences of this metaphor.

The metaphor of the student as customer in higher education is generally attributed to the influence of Total Quality Management in colleges and universities. Total Quality Management, or TQM, is a management philosophy developed by W. Edward Deming that was used in Japan during the years following World War II as a way to rejuvenate crumbling businesses and organizations. Japanese companies became so successful that American corporations took an interest in and eventually embraced the use of TQM.

In the 1980s, American colleges and universities also began to adopt TQM as a way to deal with various challenges in the academic world. Just as American corporations faced increased competition, forcing them to look for new styles of management, the rising costs of education and increased competition among educational institutions prompted schools to look for alternative strategies. Institutions also faced increasing demands for educational reform from state legislatures and the general public. TQM was first adopted in the 1980s by community and junior colleges who found it effective in helping to recruit and retain students while cutting costs.

In the late 80s and early 90s, large research universities began to use TQM as well. Initially, these large universities applied TQM to student and financial services, but many schools also expanded TQM to the classroom. TQM was seen as a way to assure critics that institutions of higher learning were providing efficient, high quality education. The use of TQM in colleges and universities was sponsored by American corporations, such as Xerox, in the form of grants and training workshops designed to spark interest in TQM (Beaver 1994).

The central features of TQM are a dedication to quality and a focus on identifying and serving the customers of an organization. Customers are the driving force behind business, making them vital to the operation of any organization. Because customers are so important, the goal of the organization is to satisfy customers with high quality goods and services. Recognizing this need for quality, TQM calls for a complete redesign of the management of the organization to ensure that quality is always achieved.

The application of TQM in organizations varies greatly, but there are key themes and ideas that are typically associated with TQM. As mentioned above, TQM is founded

on a dedication to quality and customers. Another important feature is a focus on continually improving the organization, especially by making sure that the processes that go on in the organization are efficient and effective. In order to achieve this constant improvement, TQM organizations stress the importance of teamwork and empowered employees. In theory, people want to do quality work, and they will do quality work if managers and administrators pay attention to them and create a workplace based on their ideas. It is also important to continually gather and analyze information about the organization from a variety of sources. This often involves the use of charts, diagrams, and graphs to identify breakdowns or inconsistencies in the operation of the organization and to pinpoint areas that need improvement. In general, TQM stressed the importance of establishing a work environment that promotes unity and self-improvement (Marchese 1991).

When applied to a process, a metaphor becomes more than a figure of speech in the sense that “any transference of a metaphor carries residual semiotic baggage from its context of origin into the context of application” (Schwartzman 1995, p. 3). If those who employ a particular metaphor lose sight of the descriptive elements that make up that metaphor, they begin to see the metaphor as the only way to view reality. In this way, metaphors, which are intended to enrich understanding and perception, can act as a restraint on understanding. In many cases, metaphors are useful in helping individuals, such as professors, librarians, or students, understand their roles and their position within a large organization, but metaphors are also capable of narrowing one’s field of vision and preventing the individual from grasping the full potential of his or her role in that organization.

As Trosow (2004) points out, “Terminology is an important reflection of our deeper practices and values. Our discursive practices tell us much about the *who*, *what*, *why*, and *how* of library services” (p. 87). While one might argue that use of the word “customer” rather than student or patron is a simple semantic issue, there is a certain metaphorical power in the comparison between the student or patron and customer that allows use of the word customer to influence the way we perceive students and patrons, both as individuals and as a whole. It is important to examine this metaphor as it is used in schools and libraries as a way of understanding the consequences of this metaphor, as well as the underlying tendencies that have contributed to this trend.

The fact that administrators, professors, and librarians have begun to look outside the sphere of education and librarianship is an indication that there is some difficulty in understanding the role of the student and the library user. Schwartzman (1995) describes how “analysis of the ‘student as consumer’ perspective might spark renewed interest in refining the definition of students. Education then could proceed by conceptualizing students as *students* rather than recasting them in the image of business” (p. 8). Applying this type of analysis to the “patron as customer” perspective can be equally helpful for librarians in their attempts to define the role of library users and their position in relation to the library. At a time when the explosion of information has made information literacy an essential skill in our society, it is important to understand how our conception of students and library users influences the way we teach them to become information literate individuals.

In order to determine the effect that the student as customer metaphor has had on library services, it is necessary to track the development of TQM and the usage of the

customer metaphor in higher education and libraries. This paper begins with a search of higher education literature as a way to discover trends in the way TQM and the customer metaphor have been written about. An analysis of these results allows an examination of the practices, reasons, attitudes, and theories associated with TQM and the customer metaphor. Once the specific advantages and disadvantages of the student or patron as customer metaphor are laid out, they can be held up against the “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” set forth by the Association of College and Research Libraries as a way to determine the potential effects on information literacy that may result by regarding students and library patrons as customers.



## II. TQM and the Student as Customer Metaphor in Education and Library

### Literature

Recent articles in education journals describe the metaphor of the student as customer in higher education as deriving from the adoption of Total Quality Management by colleges and universities. The first article in the ERIC database that describes students as customers appeared in 1973, and several other articles focusing on the idea of the college student as a customer were written in the 1970s. One of the first mentions of TQM and higher education appeared in a 1989 article, which describes the implementation of TQM at El Camino Community College (Gonzales 1989). A handful of writers describe students as customers before TQM shows up in the education literature, which would suggest that TQM is not the only source for this metaphor. However, the number of articles on TQM in colleges and universities grows rapidly in the early 1990s and peaks in 1993. The number of articles that describe students as customers grows more gradually, and peaks in 1999.

One important early work that describes the student as customer in great detail is a book from 1980, titled *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism*, by David Riesman. This book, which according to the ISI Citation Databases has been cited 35 times, describes the modern history of American higher education with special attention paid to the role of the market. One lengthy chapter of the book is called “College Marketing and Student Customers.” One article from 1980, “Manufacturing and Merchandising: New Pedagogy,” also refers to the idea of the student as customer, and argues that there are strong negative implications to using business models for universities because it leads them to treat students as customers

(Soles 1980). With the exception of these two works, most early references to students as customers from the 1970s and 1980s are brief, and tend to be applied to community or junior colleges rather than research universities or liberal arts colleges.

In the early 1990s, references to the student as customer become more numerous and more in depth. Many writers come out in strong support of treating students as customers as a way to deal with the rising costs of education and the perceived public disappointment with the education system in the way it provides job training. An article from 1992, "Cooperative Education: a Change for the Better," describes how "colleges should consider students as their customers and provide them with reasonable projections and data to verify the marketability of every degree program" (Thompson 1992, p. 23). As we move into the mid and later 90s, this idea of a marketable degree becomes an issue of contention. Some writers claim that allowing students to demand that institutions give them the kind of education they feel they need in order to get jobs in the future is the only way to ensure that American higher education is both efficient and of high quality. Many others write that this attitude creates selfish, lazy students who believe that education is something that is received for payment, rather than earned by hard work.

Recent articles on the metaphor of the student as customer in American higher education associate the rise of this trend with the adoption of TQM in colleges and universities. Given the fact that one of the first goals of TQM is to identify the customers of the organization, this is not surprising. Institutions that implement TQM invariably identify the student as one of the main customers of the school. However, books and articles on higher education in the United States show that writers and scholars have been analyzing the idea of the student as a customer since the 1970s, long before TQM was

used in education. It is clear that, while referring to students as customers may not have been institutional policy in American schools at this time, there was a shift in the ethos of higher education that was noticed by a few individuals who went on to write influential books and articles on the topic. In this sense, TQM is not the sole cause of the idea of the student as customer in higher education.

At the same time, the number of articles that discuss the idea of the student as customer grows very slowly throughout the 80s and early 90s, despite the presence of some influential articles. It is not until TQM has become mainstream in the early to mid 90s that we see a significant rise in the number of articles that discuss the student as customer issue. Arguments made in recent articles that link the current form of the student as customer model to TQM are convincing. Oddly enough, considering the high number of articles on both topics, the number of articles that discuss both TQM and students as customers in higher education is relatively low. A search in the EDUCAT OneSearch Category in Dialog yielded only 129 articles that mention both students as customers and TQM. This may suggest that the link between TQM and the student-customer metaphor is not particularly strong, but the content of various articles indicates that writers who tend to use the phrase “students as customers” often use it negatively. It is likely that those who write in favor of TQM may not use that particular phrase because they want to avoid this negative connotation.

In recent years, the number of articles addressing students as customers, TQM, or both has dropped drastically. This may seem to be an indication that the use of business models in education was simply another example of a fad in the philosophy of education. However, while the number of articles on both topics has dropped off, there are still

significantly more articles written on students as customers than on TQM. For example, in 2004, there was one article that mentions TQM in the title or descriptor, as opposed to 61 articles that mention students as customers. After close to twenty years of use and critique from various parties, TQM appears to be thoroughly examined in the education literature, but the importance of the student as customer metaphor is still being explored.

Despite the fact that individuals in academe were referring to students as customers long before TQM arrived on the scene, it is easy to see how the TQM philosophy spurred the growth of the student as customer metaphor. Identifying and satisfying customers lies at the heart of TQM; when TQM is translated into educational institutions, the same vocabulary is used. Thus, students become “customers” of the institution. As more and more schools embraced TQM, the student-customer label spread (Schwartzman 1995).

### **III. TQM and the Student as Customer Metaphor in Higher Education**

There are a number of potential benefits to the use of TQM and the student as customer metaphor in higher education, particularly in the realm of student services, which is where many schools put TQM to work. It is easy, especially in large universities, for students to be brushed to the side, and TQM and the student as customer model are a way of placing an emphasis on the student and the needs of students (Aliff 1998). In theory, students become more involved in their education, and by giving students a definite role, administrators recognize them as important members of the institution (Schwartzman 1995). As students become more involved in their education, they will develop closer relationships with their professors and learn to work with them as a team.

The focus on measurement and evaluation also provide potential benefits to colleges and universities. TQM calls for continuous evaluation and improvement, which leads many schools that use TQM to assess student performance constantly, rather than at the end of a course with a final grade. In this way, students who perform poorly are encouraged to improve throughout the semester. By making frequent evaluations of the teaching faculty, the institution demonstrates a willingness to make faculty members accountable for the service that they provide to students (Weaver 1992). Many institutions require students to evaluate their professors, but these evaluations often happen only at the end of a course, and are only considered when the faculty member is up for tenure. If professors and administrators pay more attention to student evaluations, students are likely to take them more seriously. Frequent evaluations can be useful in challenging what many see as complacency in higher education.

TQM is also regarded as useful because it can be applied to increase efficiency and cut down on time wasted in dealing with the bureaucracy of higher education. Increased efficiency improves the quality of life of the students and employees of the institution, who receive better service. In the areas of schools and colleges that deal with business-like transactions, such as financial services, campus housing, registration, and food services, many institutions have achieved great success through TQM (Schwartzman 1995). An increase in efficiency also satisfies state legislatures and members of the public who worry about the high costs of education. By showing that great attention is paid to the orderly and cost-efficient running of the institution, schools are able to reassure their various constituents that money spent on higher education is well managed and well spent.

One of the main critiques of the metaphor of the student as customer is that business models do not fit properly with the academic world. While it may be useful to think of students as the focus of higher education, it is a mistake to think of them as customers because they are more than that: they are participants in the learning process. This creates problems with the task of measuring quality in education. For example, when evaluating the quality of a professor's teaching, it is a mistake to assume that every student will benefit equally from a single professor. No matter how effective a professor is, no matter how high the quality of his performance, there is no guarantee that students' grades will improve. In an article from 1992, one professor points out that "Learning can take place in the absence of good teaching. It cannot take place in the absence of student effort" (Welsh 1992, p. 20). That is, it is faulty logic to think of students as customers

because they do not simply receive something for payment, they participate in a creative process (Beaver 1994).

One of the major criticisms of the use of TQM in education is that colleges and universities have many different customers who may place conflicting demands on the school. The two customer groups that are usually identified are the students of the institution and the future employers of those students, but other groups such as state government, graduate schools, donors, and even society at large are also sometimes identified as customers of the institution (Beaver 1994). With this multiplicity of customers, it is easy to see how the needs of one group could potentially interfere with the needs of others, yet this issue is often ignored in the literature. For example, John Fenwick (1992) writes that “the customer may be an individual student. However, we need to remember that the customer is also ‘the user’ of the trained student, for example the employing industry, corporation, or public service agency,” and then one paragraph later claims that “Institutions must provide top quality products and services *as perceived by the customer*” (p. 3-4). At no point does Fenwick consider the consequences of disagreement among the different types of customers.

Many of the criticisms associated with TQM and the student as customer model arise when TQM is applied to the classroom. For example, in 1992, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University designed a public policy course according to TQM policies. According to the Wall Street Journal, it was the job of the students, or customers, to “plan the course, design the syllabus, run the classes and even suggest their own grades” (Milbank 1992). One common complaint about using TQM in this manner is that the majority of college students are not prepared to make significant decisions about the

design of their college educations (Beaver 1994). I recall taking a course in mystic poetry during my sophomore year of college, and was surprised when the professor invited the entire class to have lunch at his house and decide which poets we wanted to study. We were pleased to be consulted about the content of the course, but we did not make any suggestions because we either did not know of any mystic poets yet, or because we were eager to see which poets our professor thought were important enough to be included in the course.

While some advanced students may be able to contribute to the design of a high quality course or curriculum, it is unreasonable to expect most undergraduates to have the appropriate level of expertise and maturity to make these kinds of recommendations. This calls attention to a major flaw in the use of TQM in higher education, which is that little if any distinction is made between the needs and wants of student-customers. Student-customers are rarely the driving force behind educational improvements because a number of students are happy with a less demanding curriculum (Schwartzman 1999). Schwartzman (1995) describes what he terms the “hedonistic fallacy,” which is a false equivalence between satisfied desires and quality: “The equivalence of quality with pleasing the customer works only if the customer’s conception of quality is mature and consistent with the goals of education per se” (p. 22).

Giving students what they want is not the same thing as providing students with quality education, yet much of the TQM literature speaks in terms of customer wants, desires, or preferences. Basing quality on the satisfaction of student-customer needs is equally problematic, as the meeting of needs implies the minimum elements needed to



keep a student in school, rather than the achievement of high quality in educating that student (Schwartzman 1995).

Another problem with the metaphor of the student as customer is that, by treating students like customers, we teach them that education is something that is received for payment, rather than something that must be worked for. In other words, “when we tell students that knowledge is a commodity, we tell them that learning requires no effort beyond paying for it” (wa Mwachofi et al., 1995, p.2). By treating education like a commodity, we run the double risk of encouraging students to be lazy or passive, while at the same time implying that one pursues an education for the sole purpose of finding a job someday. While it is not unusual or unhealthy for students to consider the job market in their chosen field of study, statements such as this one indicate how far this idea can be taken: “Colleges should consider students as their customers and provide them with reasonable projections and data to verify the marketability of every degree program” (Thompson 1992, p. 23). This mindset is potentially dangerous because it implies that education is only valuable when it comes to helping students find job.

Treating education like a commodity also raises the fear that the customer metaphor will become an obstacle to giving students a sense of social responsibility. By thinking of education as a commodity, we reduce its value to something that is entirely objective, and it is seen only as a way to promote personal career goals in the sense that: “education becomes an economic transaction for immediate personal gain, rather than individual transformation for self and community betterment that, at its best, liberates the student and may produce its most powerful results long after the student has left the classroom (wa Mwachofi et al., 1995, p. 2).

Another worry, which many may banish as quaint but speaks clearly to me, is that, with this emphasis on measuring quality and outputs and efficiency, those aspects of education that are unmeasurable become lost in the shuffle. One recent article pointed out that there is no good way to measure the love of learning, yet that is one of the most valuable things a professor can teach to a student (Schugart 2002). The emphasis on evaluation that is a hallmark of TQM causes some to fear that, by focusing so much attention on standards and measurable results, institutions will threaten academic freedom in the name of quality. Implementing TQM requires that the same standards be adopted by the entire college or university in order to ensure that each customer receives the same level of quality services. While standards that deal with administrative tasks may indeed improve efficiency in an institution, standards that are imposed on teaching faculty and their courses run the risk of dictating what or how a professor teaches or publishes.

Critics of the student as customer metaphor often wonder why school administrators are so quick to adopt this language. One explanation is that, for many of the people who demand schools to be accountable, the terminology of consumerism is more relevant than educational language. Schwartzman (1995) describes how “metaphoric renderings of students connect the sometimes unfamiliar academic world with environments more customary to the parents, legislators, and trustees whose decisions affecting education but do not have regular, direct exposure to academic life” (p. 9). Due to the budget cuts that have become standard in higher education, there is an environment of economic scarcity, which makes it even easier to apply business terminology to the academic sphere (Schwartzman 1999).

One might ask if the simple act of referring to students as customers has actual consequences. Schwartzman (1995) writes that, “All descriptive metaphors are implicitly prescriptive. The normative side of rendering students as customers arises because the metaphor structures how to frame the educational process itself. The standard way to talk about students thus shades into the standard for action” (p. 9-10). Schwartzman points out that some metaphors can act to restrict perception rather than expand it through the use of comparison. The value of a metaphor stems from the tension that is maintained between the similarity of the two things being compared (student and customer) and the differences of those same two concepts: “If the similarity between concepts is too great, then the metaphor is unenlightening and serves as nothing more than a synonymous substitution...if the conceptual distance is too great, then the metaphor degenerates into a riddle or paradox” (p. 11).

As mentioned earlier, there are some strong similarities between the world of business and the world of education, and the concept of student and customer are, in some ways, just close enough to cause the metaphor to collapse, which results in the identification of students with customers, as opposed to a comparison between students and customers. The language we use does influence the way we view reality, and “metaphoric choices have consequences” (Schwartzman 1995, p. 13). Referring to and thinking of students as customers has strong implications for methods of teaching, for the design of curricula, and for the way we view education as a whole.

#### **IV. TQM and the Student as Customer Metaphor in Academic Libraries**

Academic libraries face many of the same threats that caused colleges and universities to implement TQM. In the library literature, there have been hundreds of articles written about TQM and customer service in the past few years, and there are a number of parallels between academia and the library community in the way they have dealt with these developments. The debate over what to call library users (patrons, customers, clients, etc.) has been waged with particular intensity in the public library community, but this is also a major concern for academic libraries, especially as the colleges and universities that academic libraries serve have started to regard students as customers.

Budget and funding concerns in the library world are serious, and libraries feel that they have to justify their existence, similar to the way that colleges and universities have. With increased competition from the Internet and other information providers, there is a fear that the library will become obsolete or will be left behind in some way, which contributes to fears about budget cuts. The fear of becoming obsolete is mentioned in library science articles with great frequency. Libraries realize that they must do something to remain important in the future, so they look to TQM as a way to stay relevant and useful, thus ensuring their financial safety. Fitch, Thomason, and Wells (1993) describe how Samford University's Davis Library was restructured using TQM principles. The process was clearly a positive one, and the authors attribute a great deal of the success of the reorganization to the fact that the library adopted TQM concepts and techniques. The entire library staff was involved in the project, and they were able to work well together because of the spirit of openness, objectivity, and personal

responsibility that library staff agreed to adhere to. Staff members also made excellent use of charts and diagrams to identify changes to be made and to come up with new ideas about the way the library should work. Throughout the process, library employees remained dedicated to their overall goal of improving service in the library.

When it comes to thinking of patrons as customers, there are obvious benefits. Describing patrons as customers is a way of reminding “staff that the client is not just altruistically patronizing the library, but also expects and deserves good service” (Wehmeyer, Auchter, and Hirshon 1996, p. 173). Making the user the focus of library services can lead to a number of improvements in the way a library operates. Wehmeyer, Auchter, and Hirshon also point out that in the current financial situation, “academic libraries must seek budgetary allies on campus” by proving that they can provide customer satisfaction (p. 173). Raphael (2004) claims that use of the term “patron” is out of date and implies that libraries are also out of date, but that, “when you use the term ‘customer,’ you are acknowledging that what we do is, in a very real sense, a *business*.” This is important for libraries because we live in a “frightening political world where no public services are safe, [so] the best ‘businesses’ will secure future funding” (p. 82).

Many of the arguments against thinking of library patrons as customers mirror those arguments made against the student as customer metaphor. One very obvious critique is that, in a business organization, the only reason for providing quality to your customers is to earn their custom and their loyalty, that is, to convince them to buy what you have to sell. Many of the arguments for customer service in libraries are based on the idea that, by making users happy, they will continue to support their library through donations, volunteered time, or budget allocations. Thus, using this logic, library service

becomes a means rather than an end, and, as Budd (1997) points out: “the customer, or consumer, becomes a source of material gain for the library” rather than the reason for the library’s existence. Budd goes on to say that, “As such, there is an apparent contradiction in customer service discourse: although attention is to be focused on customers and their satisfaction, the desired end is really the material success of the library” (p. 313).

Taking this a step further, if we think of users as customers that we must please in order to keep our funding up, then what happens if different customer groups have different needs or desires? For example, Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof write that libraries “must be sure that their work, activities, and tasks add value to the customer, and must be prepared to give up less-valued activities” (Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof, 1996, p. 220). Statements of this nature beg the question: less valued by whom? The answer is, perhaps, less valued by those who influence library funding. Some in the library community believe that, just as college students may not know what constitutes quality in education, library patrons are often unaware of just what a library has to offer (Budd 1997). It is the job of libraries to keep patrons informed of the services available to them, but it is also true that one of the virtues of the library is that it provides access to the unexpected. If collections and services are abandoned because there is not enough demand for them, libraries diminish the potential for leading users to serendipitous discoveries.

Other writers criticize what they perceive to be the fear that libraries will be left behind. Librarians who worry that libraries will become underused and under-funded if they do not change with the times are often those who are in favor of adopting business

and marketing techniques in their libraries. However, many people in the community think that this point of view weakens the position of libraries for the future. Samuel Trosow writes that:

By failing to resist the lure of the ideology of the marketplace, we weaken ourselves in the long run and make it all the more difficult to resist further market-driven incursions into the realm of information services. We neither enhance the image of librarians nor demonstrate the value of our services by constructing our constituents as 'customers.' Succumbing to the ideology of the marketplace by appropriating its practices and terminology only weakens the claim that information should be provided as a social good. By framing our practices in the terminology of market values, we negate the tensions that exist between social and market models and open the door to further commercialization, commodification, and ultimately, privatization. (p. 87)

This refutes the claim made by Raphael (2004) that libraries that think of themselves as businesses are better able to compete for funding by pointing out that, if libraries align themselves conceptually with businesses, people will stop thinking about libraries as a necessary public service.

Another critique of thinking of patrons as customers is the danger in commodifying information. John Budd (1997) uses economic theory to explain that, by emphasizing the economic aspect of library services, we turn information into a commodity and ignore the informing quality or intellectual value of information. He writes that:

Commodification of information has an inevitable effect. Information ceases to be seen as something that informs – something that has or conveys meaning – and, instead, is seen only as an object with an established exchange value... Information as commodity is removed from information as meaning, as a meaningful communication process. It becomes nothing more than an object that has a price attached to it (p. 317).

The commodification of information is related to the concept of the commodification of education, for it has the effect of removing any sense of social responsibility from the use

of information. Information, when viewed by students as an object, is reduced in status to an item used to complete an assignment.

The issues I've just raised are applicable for all types of libraries and are not specifically related to the idea of the college student as a customer. One issue that is especially relevant is what John Buschman (2004), who has written widely on this topic, calls "give 'em what they want librarianship" (p. 85), which he sees as a direct result of the user as customer mode of thought. Translating this to an academic setting, this could be seen in a scenario where a student comes to desk and asks the librarian to find him one article, quickly, no matter how good or relevant it is (something that happens with surprising frequency in academic libraries). In the patron or student as customer framework, the librarian does just what is asked, and gives the student the first article she finds (which happens with the same surprising frequency).

This is where the customer metaphor in higher education starts to break down. If the student is a customer, then the librarian should trust that the student knows what she wants, and that to try to steer the student towards better resources would be running the risk of alienating the student and losing the student's "business." However, the student is also a customer of the university, and, as such, one assumes that the student is looking for an article because her professor wants her to learn something from this article. So, perhaps this means that the librarian should align herself with the goals of the university and the professor, and teach the student what she needs to know, ignoring the student-customer's wants. The patron as customer framework does not provide any answers to dilemmas of this sort.

Brian Quinn (2000) points out another consequence of the academic library



patron as customer model, which is part of a larger trend that he calls the “McDonaldization of Academic Libraries,” which is in turn drawn from George Ritzer’s book, *The McDonalizing of Society*. Quinn believes that academic libraries have developed many of the organizational characteristics that are found in fast food restaurant chains, and he describes how “The prevalence and standardization of policies, procedures, strategies, goals, and deadlines, along with the specialization of library work into increasingly narrow roles, has contributed to the growth of bureaucratization” (p. 249). While he acknowledges that there are potential benefits to these organizational tools and strategies, Quinn points out that:

The kind of bureaucratic, McDonalized environment that seems characteristic of many academic libraries has been criticized for creating so many levels of administrative approval that it is difficult to accomplish much that is innovative. Boldness, experimentation, and organizational responsiveness all suffer as a result. In a time of rapid change, McDonalized libraries are slow to respond, simplistic, and short-sighted because they are unable to engage the heads and hearts of their employees and are out of touch with the real needs of their users p. (254).

This appeal to intuitive and creative thinking on the part of library employees stands in stark contrast to the guidelines for reorganization used by the Davis Library at Samford University, where the library employees were instructed to “Avoid ‘feelings’ and emotional reasons” (Fitch, Thomason, and Wells, p. 296).

Quinn is especially concerned with the effect this has on interactions between librarians and student patrons who are regarded as customers. One trend that is particularly disturbing is the way in which many of today’s students demand that information be available in specific formats that may save them time or energy, despite the fact that certain formats may not be appropriate for the kind of information that is needed:

For example, many students who approach the library's reference desk no longer merely ask for information but, rather, ask for it in a certain format, often specifying computer instead of paper sources. Determining which format would best provide information was once the professional prerogative of the librarian. Now, however, many students find computers faster and easier to use than paper sources and may insist on obtaining their information in a convenient form. The quality of the information becomes secondary. In turn, librarians must acquiesce by providing the "Information Happy Meals" the student are seeking in order to guarantee "customer satisfaction" (p. 249).

Quinn also points out that, because of the increased competition among institutions of higher education, schools must work harder to keep students happy, which can sometimes lead to making school work less demanding. This is problematic for academic libraries because:

Many academic librarians have a goal to help create independent lifelong learners, but some students regard library research as being too much like work...In the McDonaldized library, "the customer is king," which essentially means giving students what they want rather than what they need (p. 250).

An interesting tie between fast food culture and library organization can be found in the notion of customer labor contributions, a management theory wherein organizations make use of the skills or abilities of their customers to carry out tasks as a way to cut costs and increase customer service. One example of this policy is the way that fast food restaurants allow customers to clear their own tables or fill their own drinks, rather than pay employees to do it. Halbesleben, Becker, and Buckley (2003) suggest that, rather than think of college students as customers, a more appropriate metaphor for the role of students is that of the student as labor contributor. In thinking of college students as labor contributors, one suggests that

They are not simply purchasing education as a service; rather, they must use the university and its resources as supplements towards their individual educations. A strength of the student labor contribution metaphor is that it suggests that the accountability for student education does not lie solely with the provider of the service (the instructor). Instead, accountability lies with the students and their

contributions toward their education. The instructor is viewed as a resource and facilitates education but does not “cause” it. And though the instructor should be ultimately responsible for his or her duties as a resource, he or she is not ultimately accountable for the education of the student (p. 256).

Quinn (2000) points out that many libraries have instituted methods for library users to perform tasks that were once done by librarians or other members of the library staff, such as filling out their own interlibrary loan requests or checking out their own books. Thinking of library users as labor contributors who use libraries and librarians as resources to accomplish their own educational goals is a potentially useful way of viewing library users, especially because this point of view emphasizes the personal accountability of the user. At the same time, the notion that the library is a resource used by library patrons who must then put contribute their own efforts is by no means new, for this is exactly what libraries have always been. Many of the attempts to put more responsibility in the hands of library users, such as checking out their own materials, are conceived not as ways to improve efficiency, but as ways of allowing library users more privacy.

Quinn (1997) describes how the patron as customer model creates unique difficulties for reference and instruction services in academic libraries because one of the tasks of the reference librarian is to redefine or renegotiate the information need of the patron-customer. He points out that:

Pure service quality tenets that insist that the customer is the sole judge of service or that satisfying customer wants is the key to quality service do not seem to fit readily with the academic library environment...a basic paradox of academic librarianship is that by not always giving students what they want, librarians are actually performing a service for the students by helping them to become more independent. (p. 367)

Quinn's use of the word paradox to describe the position of academic librarians reveals the extent to which academia is immersed in a business point of view. There is no reason that the situation described by Quinn should be considered a paradox; one could simply say that the goal of academic librarianship is not about always giving students what they want, it is about teaching them to be independent researchers. It is only when we put things in the framework of the student as customer that an otherwise straightforward element of academic librarianship becomes a paradox.

Further evidence of the risks in treating library patrons as customers can be found in an examination of the "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" set forth by the Association of College and Research Libraries. In a section titled "Information Literacy and Higher Education," the relationship between information literacy and the mission of higher education is described as such:

Developing lifelong learners is central to the mission of higher education institutions. By ensuring that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking, and by helping them construct a framework for learning how to learn, colleges and universities provide the foundation for continued growth throughout their careers, as well as in their roles as informed citizens and members of communities. Information literacy is a key component of, and contributor to, lifelong learning. Information literacy competency extends learning beyond formal classroom settings and provides practice with self-directed investigations as individuals move into internships, first professional positions, and increasing responsibilities in all arenas of life (p. 4)

While this statement acknowledges the importance of preparing students for future careers, the ACRL sees the purpose of higher education as one that extends beyond acquiring skills and knowledge needed for the workplace. The phrase "lifelong learning" has been cheapened to a certain degree through overuse, but it is an apt description of the potential benefits of gaining competency in information literacy. The ACRL views the development of lifelong learners as an essential element of the mission of academic

librarianship, making it the responsibility of member libraries to go beyond merely supporting students as they complete the tasks required for graduation.

The “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” provide a clear and detailed framework for considering the role of a college or university library, and it is useful to examine the different elements of this role to see how they may be affected by the library patron /student as customer metaphor. According to the ACRL “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education”, an information literate individual is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

It is obvious that, by simply giving patrons what they ask for, librarians do not encourage the first two aspects of information literacy, but I am more concerned with the ability of patrons and students to evaluate information, incorporate information into one’s knowledge base, and understand the issues surrounding the use of information. When information is treated as a commodity, it becomes difficult to clearly evaluate that information for relevance and bias because the patron has learned to think of information as something that has material value. If a student chooses to cite an article simply because it fills a requirement set by her professor, she sees that article as an object that serves the specific purpose of getting her a good grade on her assignment. As for the final requirement, thinking of information as a commodity may help users to understand some of the economic and legal issues surrounding the use of information, but this frame

of mind is detrimental to the goal of teaching patrons to make ethical use of information in a social sense.

Individuals on both sides of the patron as customer argument agree that the difference between calling library users customers or patrons is more than semantic, and that term used to refer to library users has some power over the way library users are treated. What many do not acknowledge is the extent to which the customer metaphor crowds out any alternatives in the way we think about students and library users. As Budd (1997) says:

Finally, the discourse on customer and commodity in the academic library takes on the characteristics of ideology. Specifically, it is ideological in that it asserts a dominance over other discourses, and does so through distortion of context that all but eliminates any teleological sense (p. 320).

Eventually, the patron as customer metaphor may cease to become a metaphor as library users come to think of themselves as customers, a shift in perception that would cause a serious change for libraries in general. As Edwards and Krow-Lucal (2004) plainly state:

Libraries should acknowledge the communitarian aspects of our operations; it's how we work, so why hide that? And how can libraries communicate noncommercial values to those who come to them if the rhetoric is commercial? No – in our opinion, people use libraries, they do not purchase from them. Thus, such people should be called “users,” not customers,” both for the sake of accuracy and as a reminder that we form part of one of the most practical, democratic, and valuable movements in existence today (p. 86).

In the end, one must ask why there is this urge to think of students and library patrons in a metaphorical sense. Librarians have long realized that providing quality service is one of the most important jobs of the library. S. R. Ranganathan's five laws of library science have been around since 1932, and do an admirable job of articulating the services that libraries should provide to their patrons. The simple fact that, in today's

society, it is so difficult for individuals to wrap their minds around the idea that a student is a student and a library user is a library user indicates the delicate position of education and libraries in an increasingly corporate world. By continuing to refer to college students and library patrons as customers rather than what they simply are, we contribute to the sense that education, research, and access to library collections and services are irrelevant in today's world.

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