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Paradigm or Paradox? Student Consumerism  
and Learning at a Liberal Arts Institution

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Jessica Martin

May 2018

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jessica L. Martin

entitled

Paradigm or Paradox? Student Consumerism  
and Learning at a Liberal Arts Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2018

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### Abstract

Existing literature widely asserts the increasing prevalence of consumer-minded students, often presenting consumerism and learning as opposed. The purpose of the study is to better understand the relationship between consumer and learner orientations and explore aspects of a liberal arts education affecting each. To this end, the study employed a mixed methods embedded sequential design. A survey—utilizing both quantitative learner and consumer scales along with qualitative open-ended items—was administered to students. A subsequent focus group further clarified and explored survey results. Quantitative data revealed students identify more strongly as learners than consumers but still identify positively as consumers. Furthermore, a correlation revealed a weak inverse relationship between the two factors. In the qualitative data, students spoke of learning and consumerism as strongly opposed, thus challenging the quantitative findings. Students identified community, professors, and faith as most impactful to forming learner identities. Parents, society, and high tuition strongly influenced consumer orientations. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data revealed the inherent complexity in the relationship between consumerism and learning. Therefore, the importance of appropriately acknowledging both learning and consumerism when communicating with students serves as the basis for implications discussed.

## Acknowledgements

*In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others.*

*—Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup>*

The thesis is a small part of a much larger reality. Completing this thesis may be one of the most rewarding things I have ever done, not because I have fallen in love with the topic—though I have—but because of the richness I have experienced as a result of the communal effort that has led to this point. To the many who have invested in me over the last year and a half, thank you for contributing to the deep richness that has been this season of my life by giving me so many reasons to be grateful. This thesis is as much yours as it is mine.

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To Emilie and Logan, I came to Taylor with hardly an expectation of being welcomed into a friendship, nonetheless one that would end up feeling so much like

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century German pastor, theologian, spy, and anti-Nazi dissident—in his book *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

family. Thank you for giving of your time, space, and hearts so freely. You have loved me in the most tangible and perfectly intangible ways. I can't imagine having gone through this journey without you!

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Context and Causes of Consumerism**

Consumeristic thinking, resulting from rising levels of competition within the higher education marketplace, is an increasingly prevalent reality among students. In evaluating such competition, Derek Bok (2013) offered, “The effort and initiative that rivalry inspires are to the good when directed toward goals that are clearly worthwhile. They are not so advantageous, however, when universities compete with one another in pursuing aims of more questionable nature” (p. 389). Moreover, the American Council on Education explained that, when influenced by capitalism and seemingly rational markets, “American colleges and universities vie for students, faculty, and funding under the assumption that diversity and high quality are best achieved through competition” (Eckel & King, 2004, p. iii). Alas, competition comes with a hefty price tag for both universities and the students they enroll.

As enrollment continues to rise, competition for the best students escalates. Eckel and King (2004) clarified the connection between competition and rising operating costs, explaining, “Institutions are working to update and expand facilities and services to meet student demand for state-of-the-art technology, small class sizes, and world-class academic and recreational facilities” (p. 6). To maintain enrollment levels and thus revenue, institutions compete for students by offering bigger and better facilities

(Sightlines, 2016). The most recent *State of Facilities in Higher Education* report noted, “In the last century, colleges and universities have become more residential and offer more campus services, like dining and recreation options, to make living on campuses more attractive to prospective students” (Sightlines, 2016, p. 5). Building for the sake of impressing and enticing prospective students results in a startling reality: “50 percent of campus growth is in buildings not used for academic programs” (Sightlines, 2016, p. 2). Consequently, the competitive building spree within American higher education is appropriately termed “the amenities arms race” (Newlon, 2014). Sadly, “students often demand that more fun stuff, rather than deep learning occur” within new buildings (McCluskey, 2016, para. 1). Expensive amenities increase cost, often with little regard to educational quality.

Unfortunately, though costs are rising, state aid—a major source of funding for public institutions—has been slowly decreasing (Zusman, 2005). Research reveals “state funds for all public institutions dropped from 46 percent of current fund revenues in 1981 to 36 percent in 2000. . . . two-thirds of the change reflects the substitution of tuition and fee income in place of state support” (Zusman, 2005, p. 4). Such a shift is problematic as, over the past 20 years, student tuition and fees have risen twice as fast as inflation, far exceeding increases in financial aid resources and family income (Eckel & King, 2004, p. 6).

Rising tuition has resulted in a national student debt crisis that has many students and parents questioning the value of a college education. Manning (2015) argued that questioning the long-term value of investing in a college degree “is a trend that poses a serious public relations challenge for higher education in the coming years” (para 6). In

trying to prove worth and justify cost, colleges and universities may enter a downward spiral of accommodating and marketing to student preference for entertainment and comfort through material provisions. In doing so, institutions reinforce students' perceptions of themselves as consumers of universities.

### **Consumerism and Student Learning**

The student as consumer analogy maintains the view of education as strictly transactional (Snare, 1997, p. 122). Consumer ideology considers education through a buyer-oriented lens where students can pay money in exchange for a product—a degree (Snare, 1997, p. 122). Students are increasingly driven by educational outcomes, namely good grades and degrees, because of a growing concern with getting a return on investment. Accordingly, students place much more emphasis on functional value—useful practical skills—than on epistemic value—a desire for knowledge (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). Whether propagated by the treatment of students or by student postures, the student as consumer analogy is detrimental to learning.

Institutions that view students as consumers interact with students as customers of the university. However, businesses and institutions possess fundamentally different missions—the former being to increase profits and the latter learning. To keep students as customers, institutions must employ best business practices rather than best educational practices. Student input becomes synonymous with quality assurance, and a “the customer is always right” approach emerges—even though, quite literally in education, the student is not always right (Fairchild & Crage, 2014). The dissonance and discomfort characteristic of cognitive development and learning (Evans, Forney, Guido,

Patton, & Renn, 2010) is contradictory to customer satisfaction. Institutions exist primarily to help students learn, which is often uncomfortable and even unsatisfying.

Moreover, students who view themselves as consumers maintain certain postures, or dispositions, unfavorable to genuine learning. For instance, consumeristic thinking is characterized by academic entitlement. Marshall, Fayombo, and Marshall (2015) highlighted students' beliefs that they are endowed with certain academic rights as consumers. Specifically, students feel entitled to a degree because of what they pay for college (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Similarly, consumerism underscores dispositions of disengagement and lack of personal responsibility (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Marshall et al., 2015; Plunkett, 2014), expectations of entertainment (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002), and a need to control one's environment (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). Consumeristic dispositions negate the learning process (Fairchild & Crage, 2014)—diminishing student involvement, ownership, and effort (Marshall et al., 2015)—in favor of degrees and grades given freely as a receipt of payment (McMillan & Cheney, 1996).

### **Liberal Education**

Liberal education is a philosophy centered on empowering individuals, liberating the mind, and cultivating social responsibility (Ramaley & Leakes, 2002). A greater concern for the process rather than specific content of learning characterizes a liberal education. Moreover, Kahan (2013) said, “. . . a liberal education [has] nothing to do with teaching someone how to earn a living, and everything to do with forming the characters and sharpening the minds of generalists, not specialists” (pp. 159–160). Schneider (2004) further explained the ways in which a liberal education embodies a holistic approach by allowing connections. Students are encouraged to connect multiple



disciplines, theory to practice, and coursework to lived experiences (Schneider, 2004). In connecting parts with the whole, the concrete with the abstract, the past with the present, and philosophy with reality (King, Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007)—students learn to think critically and engage wholly.

### **The Current Study**

A liberal education, purposing to develop students as general learners and critical thinkers, dissuades consumeristic ideation. A gap in the literature leaves room for further understanding the relationship between consumerism and student learning, as well as the impact of a liberal education on consumer mindsets of students. The following research question and sub-questions guided the present study:

1. What is the relationship between consumerism and student learning at a liberal arts university?
2. Is there a relationship between a consumer orientation and time spent at a liberal arts institution?
3. To what aspects of their liberal education would students attribute increases or decreases in consumeristic thinking and learning?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Liberal Arts Education

When choosing a college, students face an abundance of institutional types. From large public research institutions to trade schools to small faith-based liberal arts institutions, institutional characteristics are widely considered influential factors in student learning and intellectual development (Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2003). Pike et al. (2003) explored the effect of institutional mission on student involvement and educational outcomes, showing the interconnected nature of the two. Acknowledging the effect the mission of a liberal arts institution plays in fostering learning requires a clear understanding of the definition, purpose, and goals of a liberal arts education.

Clearly defining the phrases *liberal education*, *liberal arts*, and *liberal arts colleges* is crucial to establishing a foundational understanding for the succeeding discussion. Ramaley and Leakes (2002) defined these “often confused terms”:

- Liberal Education: A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than specific content, liberal education can occur at all types of colleges and universities.
- Liberal Arts: Specific disciplines (the humanities, social sciences, and sciences)

- Liberal Arts Colleges: A particular institutional type—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines. (p. 25)

For the purposes of this study, a liberal arts college is one that meets the definition above and also employs the liberal education philosophy. In fact, as the literature addresses the goals, purposes, and outcomes of a liberal arts education, the above terms are often used interchangeably, revealing how the best liberal arts colleges make use of liberal education.

In discussing the evolution from the classical to the English notion of the liberal arts, Kahan (2013) stated, “. . . in one thing they [are] identical: a liberal education [has] nothing to do with teaching someone how to earn a living, and everything to do with forming the characters and sharpening the minds of generalists, not specialists” (pp. 159–160). A liberal arts education is as much about the learning process itself as that which is learned. All the literature agrees that, in this way, a liberal arts education is holistic in its approach.

Providing students with the skills necessary for constructing lives of substance and achievement, thus helping them become wise citizens, is largely seen as the overarching goal of a liberal arts education (King et al., 2007). Merging the generalist notion and the holistic emphasis previously mentioned, King et al. (2007) argued a liberal arts education “prepare[s] students with skills that are not context-specific or bound by the limitations of our current understanding[s] . . . but that instead are applicable to new and changing contexts, expanding knowledge bases, and emerging issues” (p. 2). These skills are increasingly important in today’s technology and information age; information

is incredibly accessible, but students' abilities to process and make meaning of such an influx of information are limited (Wiebe, 2016). Given the current landscape of information, the liberal arts emphasis on learning as "an interactive and vigorous information-seeking process . . . one that is 'nonlinear, dynamic, holistic, and flowing'" is incredibly pertinent (Foster, 2003 as cited in Wiebe, 2016, p. 55).

The goals and outcomes of a liberal arts education include inquiry and intellectual judgment, social responsibility and civic engagement, and integrative and culminating learning (Schneider, 2004). These outcomes aim "to address the multiple dimensions of students' identities" (King et al., 2007, p. 3). In realizing these three main outcomes, a liberal arts education fulfills its purposes of teaching students how to think, how to learn, and how to see things as a whole (Harris, 1991). In fulfilling these purposes, a liberal arts education is thought to contribute to a graduate's satisfaction in life.

The first outcome involves teaching students "how to make sense out of complexity, how to find and use evidence, and how to apply their knowledge to new problems and unscripted questions" (Schneider, 2004, p. 9). To this description, King et al. (2007) added "lifelong learning" and the hope that students might reflect "a strong desire to learn, ask questions, and consider new ideas . . . [by] taking initiative to learn, not being satisfied with a quick answer, and possessing intrinsic motivation for intellectual growth" (p. 5).

Social responsibility and civic engagement focus not only on diversity but also on the inescapable interdependence between people and cultures (Schneider, 2004). In order to maximize learning and understanding, a liberal arts education fosters active understanding and appreciation of differing views and people. *Active* means that service

and interaction are required in the process of understanding. King et al. (2007) list moral character and intercultural effectiveness as outcomes rightly falling within the category of social responsibility and civic engagement.

Lastly, integrative and culminating learning emphasize connectivity by providing opportunities for students “to make connections across disciplines and fields, to connect theories to practice, and even to engage . . . lived experiences in the context of what they are learning” (Schneider, 2004, p. 9). In doing so, students learn to connect parts with the whole, the concrete with the abstract, the past with the present, and philosophy with reality (King et al., 2007). Moreover, making connections allows students to understand the skills gained through a liberal arts education are far more “marketable” in the long-term than specific seemingly “marketable” skills in the short-term.

Lemann (2004) briefly summarized and concluded the definition, goals, purposes, and benefits of a liberal arts education:

Liberal education is best defined with its most literal meaning: It is education that liberates, that frees the mind from the constraints of a particular moment and set of circumstances, that permits one to see possibilities that are not immediately apparent, to understand things in a larger context, to think about situations conceptually and analytically, to draw upon a base of master knowledge when faced with specific situations. The essential paradox, or one might even say the miracle of liberal education, is that by being evidently impractical, it equips a student for life far more richly and completely, and across a far wider expanse of time and space, than does education whose sole aim is to be useful. (p. 14)

Clearly, liberal education is more focused on the process of education than as a measurable outcome. As Lemann pointed out, a single outcome is limited in application, but a process is applicable in light of any number or circumstances.

### **The Student as Consumer Paradigm**

Thinking *student* is congruent with *consumer* is the basis of the student consumer analogy, which views education as transactional (Snare, 1997). Consumer ideology asserts education is a buyable and sellable product and that students can pay money in exchange for knowledge (Snare, 1997). Klinger (n.d.) astutely pointed out the ways consumerism pervades cultural identity, even impacting the language students and educators use. She explained that “students ‘get’ grades rather than earn them, and ‘go to’ or ‘attend’ college rather than contribute to the learning and educational processes” (Klinger, n.d., p. 5). Klinger noted the influence this language has on students’ interpretation of what enrolling in a college or university means.

Consequently, the world of higher education becomes a marketplace where people gather to “buy and sell their wares” (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 2). McMillan and Cheney (1996) explained that, with the development of capitalism, “the buyer assumed a more central position in an economic system characterized (at least some of the time) by open competition”—further fostering a consumeristic culture (pp. 2–3). Institutions are then compelled to market to consumers in order to sell their product. Bok (2003) lamented, “Observing these trends, I worry that commercialization may be changing the nature of academic institutions in ways we will come to regret” (p. x).

Sheth et al. (1991) identified five consumption values they believe influence consumer choice: functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and

conditional value. Sheth et al. explained that functional value involves perceived utility and a “capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance” and is “traditionally . . . viewed as the primary driver of consumer choice” (p. 160). Epistemic value—which is measured in terms of arousing curiosity, providing novelty, or satisfying a desire for knowledge (Sheth et al., 1991)—takes a back seat to functional value, especially within higher education today. The Higher Education Research Institute’s 2015 national survey of incoming freshmen in gave ample evidence of this reality. Incoming college students are increasingly concerned with getting a return on investment. Of all incoming freshmen participating in the 2015 study, 81.9% deemed “being very well off financially” as an essential or very important objective, and 85% deemed being able to get a better job as a very important factor in deciding to go to college (Eagan et al., 2015). Freshmen also identified academic reputation and future job prospects as the top reasons for choosing a particular college. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) voiced concern over the way this consumeristic attitude increasingly sees universities as places where pre-established needs can be bought and sold.

**Dispositions of student consumers.** Much research has gone into identifying characteristics of students that are thought to have emerged out of consumeristic thinking. These characteristics include academic entitlement, disengagement and lack of personal responsibility, an emphasis on entertainment, and a need for control. Understanding student consumer dispositions is important to understanding the ways consumerism impacts learning.

*Academic entitlement.* Marshall et al. (2015) emphasized that students believe they are endowed with certain privileges and rights simply because they are the

consumer. When institutions grant students consumer privileges and rights during the college search process, assuming they will expect to be treated accordingly after matriculating is reasonable. In their research on academic entitlement, Singleton-Jackson et al. (2010) explained an attitude of academic entitlement rests in students' beliefs that they "are entitled to or deserving of certain goods and services to be provided by their institutions and professors . . . outside of [their own] actual performance or responsibilities inside the classroom" (p. 344). Delucchi and Korgen (2002) showed that students feel entitled to a degree because of what they pay for college.

Delucchi and Korgen (2002) further displayed that students are more concerned with high grades than learning as exemplified by the 73.3% of surveyed students who indicated their willingness to take a class in which they would learn little or nothing but would receive an A. Students who think this way are also likely to maintain that effort and self-disclosure should be rewarded in grading (Fairchild & Crage, 2014). Lombardi (2007) justified this phenomenon by explaining that the manufacturing world guarantees deliverable products free of defects and predictable in the way they perform intended functions; in this way, "academic success entitlement . . . reflects a broader belief that institutions need to guarantee results not opportunity" (para. 3). Furthermore, Lombardi pointed out an attitude of academic entitlement paving the way for disengagement and a lack of responsibility that is characteristic of student consumers.

***Disengagement and lack of personal responsibility.*** Plunkett (2014) identified lack of personal responsibility as a major tenet of student consumerism and noted a major shift in student attitudes. Because students assume a degree is a result of payment, little motivates students to critically engage in the learning process or to earn credentials



(Fairchild & Crage, 2014). Increasingly, students expect positive academic outcomes while putting in minimal effort (Marshall et al., 2015). This expectation of high grades given for little effort is referred to as “grade grubbing” (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002, p. 104). The data collected by Delucchi and Korgen suggested students do the least amount of work necessary in order to graduate but have little intrinsic interest in learning. The focus groups in Singleton-Jackson’s et al. (2010) study revealed students view showing up and doing the classwork, regardless of performance, as warranting a passing grade.

Students expect increasingly unidirectional exchanges between institutions and themselves (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). However, passive learners are not partners in the learning process (Snare, 1997). As such, these students miss out on “understanding and mastering themselves and this world” (Snare, 1997, p. 122). Unlike consumers who have no responsibilities beyond economics (Davis, 2011), students must invest personally to move from informational to transformational learning (Boes, 2011).

***Emphasis on entertainment.*** Plunkett (2014) lamented the frequency with which educators complain of students’ active and respectful participation in education being replaced by inattentiveness and disrespect. Not only do students expect to receive grades and degrees for the price they pay, they also expect to be entertained in the process. An expectation of entertainment is evidenced by Delucchi and Korgen’s (2002) study, which found the majority of students feel it is the teacher’s responsibility to keep them attentive in class. The expectations of students are increasingly for entertainment in the institution.

***Need for control.*** A final trend highlighted by Singleton-Jackson’s et al. (2010) research is that, as consumers, students desire control. Students claim that, so long as they are not being disruptive, it is their right as the customer to make their own choices

concerning the learning environment (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). More specifically, students communicate that, since they are paying for their education, they have the right to text, answer phone calls, show up late or not at all, leave early, and have their classes catered to individual learning styles (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). Supporting this thought, one student said, “[W]e’re paying for it, so it’s our issue” (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010, p. 353). This attitude is widely acknowledged across campuses today.

### **Consumerism’s Subversion of Educational Values**

With the student-consumer model, higher education has willingly shifted toward a business model. This shift proves troubling as the mission of a business is fundamentally at odds with that of an educational institution (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Cragge, 2014; Harris, 2007; McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Potts (2005) even went so far as to say, “. . . the consumer model of higher education marks a fundamental assault on higher education, destroying it from within” (p. 55). This shift is one that Fairchild and Cragge (2014) noted as synonymous with the change from viewing education as a public good—developing democratic, well-rounded citizens capable of advancing society—to viewing education as a tool meant primarily for private social advancement. Not only so, but while the traditional mission of higher education is to facilitate learning, businesses exist largely to make a profit. In order to increase profit margins, businesses employ certain practices that, when extended to education, are harmful. When an institution is perceived as a means to acquire a guaranteed product, it becomes a business employing common business practices.

**Total quality management.** The harm in applying business ideologies to higher education is clear, especially when considering concepts like total quality management

(TQM) and the notion that “the customer is always right.” When education is seen as a business in which students are consumers, it makes sense for institutions to adopt a business model to evaluate quality. Total quality management, a philosophy that became popular in higher education in the 1980s, is a means of evaluating quality within service-oriented businesses (Schwartzman, 1995). Additionally, TQM determines quality by orienting around the customer and his or her satisfaction (Schwartzman, 1995). Furthermore, customers are so foundational to TQM philosophy that quality is not only measured according to their judgments but is even initially defined by them (Schwartzman, 1995). Taking a cue from TQM in business models, institutions of higher education began to gauge their success by student satisfaction. Schwartzman (1995) noted TQM’s shortcoming is its presumption that students are fully informed as they express their desires.

Swagler’s (1978) argument that students do not have the kind of information needed to evaluate objectives opposes this “user-based definition of quality” (Seymour, 1993, p. 43). Swagler further explained that, in order to evaluate the quality of an institution for the objectives of financial and job security—identified by the consumer as the “good”—a student needs information only attainable through experiencing financial and job security. Unfortunately, the only way to gather this information is by actually attending an institution (Swagler, 1978). Since prospective students, by definition, are not yet attending an institution and thus have no basis for evaluating the quality of an institution absent that experience, it makes little sense to cater to their definition of quality. Nonetheless, institutions consistently respond to the desires of students, thus

enforcing students “as a market force to which institutions must adapt in order to survive” (Schwartzman, 1995, p. 219).

**Customer satisfaction.** The best business is often the one with the most profit, gained by attracting either an increased number of customers or customers willing to pay more for a given product (Davis, 2011). To acquire more high-paying customers, institutions market to students based on demand and satisfaction. Such a customer-centric model is accompanied by the belief, in word and practice, that “the customer is always right.” A business model holds that, when students complain classes are too boring, hard, or uncomfortable, they are right. Unfortunately, such a mentality is at odds with feelings of dissonance—identified as a central catalyst to learning in psychosocial and cognitive development theories (Evans et al., 2010).

Delucchi and Korgen (2002) addressed and countered a business model for higher education saying, “A folk wisdom of the market—that the customer is always right—can be pedagogically irresponsible when adopted in the classroom” (p. 106). Students often avoid discomfort, challenge, and constructive criticism (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Crage, 2014)—even though these typically cause the deepest levels of academic growth. Quite literally, in education, the student is not always right (Fairchild & Crage, 2014) and certainly not always comfortable. Davis (2011) clarified the interaction between dissonance and learning:

Especially where values, ethics, and deeply ingrained traditions are associated, feelings of anger and resentment (natural to disequilibrium) often occur.

Educational institutions are uniquely called on by society . . . to challenge

students to more deeply integrate for themselves a more cogent, differentiated understanding. (p. 87)

Davis further explained that the educator always holds some level of expertise.

Otherwise, students would not likely pay tuition to learn from him or her.

In summary, consumeristic thinking subverts traditional educational values.

Operating an institution under businesses assumptions subverts the core educational value of student learning by shifting institutional focus away from student growth in favor of customer satisfaction. Moreover, when consumer-minded students view themselves as customers to be satisfied, student dispositions fostering learning are undermined.

### **Liberal Education and Student Consumerism**

As prospective students and their parents view college increasingly as a means to a job, the perceived value of a liberal arts education and the percentage of students attending such institutions has dropped (Hersh, 1997). Disinterest in learning for learning's sake, the costly nature of many liberal arts institutions, a preoccupation with value, and a general unawareness of what a liberal education entails contribute to the decrease in perceived value (Hersh, 1997). Restating some of Tocqueville's words, Kahan (2013) reminded readers, "Liberal education is a monument to the idea that learning is glorious when inspired by pure virtue, but not when it is directly linked to a future paycheck" (p. 161). For all the reasons detailed in this chapter, the consumer mentality of students is troubling to many educators.

Even more troubling is a consumer-driven educational model that—endorsing and facilitating students' consumer mentalities—leaves little room for the student responsibility and ownership of learning foundational to traditional ideologies behind a

liberal arts education. Singleton-Jackson et al. (2010) asserted, “[A] cognitive shift is required to move from consumer to scholar” and is necessary for a student to understand that “once they have purchased the opportunity to access higher education they have to play an active role in the ‘product’ performing as advertised” (p. 348). Based on the description of liberal education provided, a liberal arts education should intuitively foster a shift away from consumeristic student thinking.

Though outcomes are less easily measured, liberal education emphasizes generalized skills and the ability to apply such skills to a vast array of settings as educational best practices. On the other hand, product-driven consumerism hails specialization of skills for the sake of measurable gains the most beneficial form of education. As such, one would expect a liberal arts education to impact students’ postures toward learning by altering students’ consumeristic mentalities.

## **Conclusion**

Currents literature suggests the rising prevalence of consumeristic thinking among college students threatens traditional values of education. A transactional mindset of payment for product results in shifting student expectations. Students expect institutions to satisfy them as customers by conferring academic outcomes in the forms of grades and degrees. Consequently, students feel academically entitled, are disengaged, desire to be entertained, and assume a right to control comfort levels in their learning environments. Such characteristics oppose the values of involvement and disequilibrium foundational to learning.

The literature is far from silent concerning consumerism in higher education, particularly in regard to its effects on the ways students view their education. Moreover,

the literature thoroughly addresses the foundations, purposes, and perceptions of liberal education at liberal arts institutions. In some rare instances, meaningful connections are made between consumerism and a liberal arts education. However, no research specifically addresses the impact of a liberal arts education on the consumer mentality.

In his article “The Threats to Liberal Arts Colleges,” Paul Neely (1999) addressed the way liberal arts colleges “may be slowly undermined by the economics of their business and the marketing of their product . . . the results [possibly] challeng[ing] the very purpose for which those schools exist” (pp. 29–30). Though the article represents the large-scale effects of consumerism on liberal arts institutions, the literature fails to show how a liberal education promotes or impedes consumer orientations. Furthermore, the literature reveals very little concerning if and how these mentalities change, especially in an environment—such as a liberal arts institution—where one might expect an increase or decrease in consumeristic thinking to occur.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The study explored the relationships between students' consumer orientations, learner identities, and experiences at a liberal arts institution using a two-phase embedded sequential design. The quantitative first phase of the study employed a correlational design in which a survey instrument relating consumerism and learning dispositions of students at a Christian liberal arts institution was utilized. In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of their university's impact on their consumer orientations.

#### **Embedded Design**

Mixed methods research involves using both quantitative and qualitative methods to offer a better understanding of a research question than either method offers alone (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Moreover, such a method involves “merging, integrating, linking, or embedding the two ‘strands’” (Creswell, 2012, p. 535). Creswell explained the usefulness of mixed methods in providing multiple perspectives. Furthermore, mixing methods allows researchers to conduct experiments “yielding useful information about outcomes,” developing a better understanding of how outcomes are achieved through the additional collection of qualitative data (p. 535).

Creswell (2012) suggested an embedded design as one such approach allowing for such an exploration. The purpose of the embedded design is for one form of data to



support, augment, or explain another primary form of data (Creswell, 2012). The strengths of an embedded design include combining the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research and further clarifying the qualitative data with quantitative data, or vice versa (Creswell, 2012). Creswell specifically noted the usefulness of such a design “during a correlational study [in which] the researcher may gather secondary qualitative data to help understand the reasons for the correlational results” (p. 544).

### **Quantitative Research**

The first phase of the study utilized a correlational survey design. A survey design is a form of quantitative research in which a researcher identifies trends in a population (Creswell, 2008). According to Creswell, a correlational design focuses “on examining the association or relation of one or more variables” (p. 60). In correlational studies, the researcher does not seek to manipulate variables. Rather, the researcher relates two or more variables using the correlation statistic (Creswell, 2012). The study utilized the survey results to quantitatively investigate the correlation between consumerism and learning in students, as well as to compare the means of consumer orientation scores in freshmen and seniors. Additionally, the research investigated the relationships between such variables as year in school, major, gender, academic performance measured by GPA, GPA goal, and financial responsibility.

**Participants.** Data collection occurred at a small, Christian, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The population of the residential institution is approximately 2,000 students. The institution requires students to take a series of core courses beginning fall semester of freshmen year and ending either fall or spring semester of senior year.

The survey was administered in two university-required classes—one freshmen class and one senior class—in the fall of 2017. The freshman class consisted of 433 non-transfer students, and the senior class had 236 students. The survey was available to a combined total of 669 students. After controlling for incomplete responses, a total of 222 student responses yielded a 33% overall response rate. Divided by class, 146 freshmen responses and 76 senior responses yielded 34% and 32% response rates, respectively.

Of the 222 students who completed the data collection process, 63% were female ( $n = 139$ ), and 37% were male ( $n = 82$ ), a ratio roughly representative of the larger institution. In line with the respective class sizes, 66% of participants were freshmen ( $n = 146$ ), and 34% were seniors ( $n = 76$ ). Participants ranged in age from 18-22 ( $M = 19.27$ ) and represented a wide variety of majors.

**Instruments.** The researcher received permission to use the survey developed by Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2016), which assesses consumer orientations and learner identity in students. The original survey consisted of 15 consumer statements and 20 learner statements (Bunce et al., 2016). The survey, developed in the UK, was amended to account for differing language and grading practices in the UK and US. After piloting the survey, several statements were reworded to improve clarity. Due to an oversight in survey administration, the last 6 of the 20 learner statements were not included in the final administered survey. The final survey consisted of 15 consumer statements and 14 learner statements, along with two open-ended free response questions (see Appendix A).

To establish acceptable validity of the 14-item learning factor used in data collection, the researcher conducted a t-test to compare the means of the partial 14-item learning and full 20-item partial learning factors, utilizing a separate sample of students

similar in composition to the original sample. Because the “t stat” value fell between  $-/+$  “t Critical two-tail” values and the  $P(T \leq t)$  two tail was greater than 0.05, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis—that there was no significant difference between the means of the two samples. Accordingly, the researcher assumed the 14-item survey to be at least as adequate a measure of learner identity as the full 20-item survey. Participants indicated the level to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement by responding on a 7-point Likert scale on which 0=strongly disagree, 3=neutral, and 6=strongly agree (Bunce et al., 2016). Bunce et al. (2016) affirmed the usefulness and dependability of the survey in reporting “very good internal reliability for each scale: consumer orientation=0.80, learner identity=0.83 (Cronbach’s alpha)” (p. 8).

**Procedure.** Upon being granted IRB approval from the institution where research was conducted, the researcher provided a link to the online survey tool via the electronic academic portal in each respective freshmen and senior class; the survey was administered in both courses in the fall of 2017. Students wishing to participate in the study were provided a brief overview of the research being conducted and electronically signed a consent form (see Appendix C) before filling in demographic information and responding to randomized consumer and learner statements. The survey remained open for three weeks and reminder emails were sent periodically throughout that timeframe.

**Analysis.** At the end of the collection period, the survey data was transferred from the online survey tool to a spreadsheet. All calculations were run using SPSS. The researcher calculated the mean of the various survey items within the learner identity and consumer orientation factors to be used as composite scores for each. Descriptive

statistics were generated for each variable, and a t-test was used to compare the means of the learner identity composite scores obtained from the complete and partial surveys.

The researcher then “measure[d] the degree of association (or relation) between . . . variables using the statistical procedure of correlational analysis” (Creswell, 2008, p. 60). With SPSS, the researcher calculated the degree of association, a single number known as the Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient. Creswell (2012) explained that, in analyzing degree of association, a correlation coefficient has both magnitude and direction with coefficients ranging from -1.00 to +1.00, with 0.00 indicating no correlation. The analysis included a measure of statistical significance, a *p* value.

### **Qualitative Research**

The qualitative phase assessed student perceptions of their own consumer and learner orientations through a semi-structured focus group interview. Specifically, the researcher explored student perceptions of the impact of a liberal arts education on consumeristic ideation. A phenomenological design was used to describe the essence of individuals’ shared experiences of a common concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The research explored the phenomenon of student consumerism. In developing a textural description and a structural description of student experiences, the researcher sought to develop “a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 76). Since the overall study employed an embedded design, the qualitative interview questions emerged from the study’s first phase (Creswell, 2012).

**Participants.** After completing the survey, participants were asked to provide their contact information and to sign an additional consent form (see Appendix D) if they were willing to participate in a semi-structured focus group. Purposeful sampling was

employed to select participants. Specifically, theory or concept sampling, a strategy in which the researcher samples individuals because they can help generate a theory or explore concepts within a theory, was employed (Creswell, 2012).

Seniors and freshmen—having demonstrated awareness of their own perspectives and postures towards education—as determined by answers to short response questions at the end of the administered survey, were invited via email to participate in a focus group. The researcher attempted to employ maximal variation sampling in this participant subset to select demographically diverse participants, representative of the greater student population (Creswell, 2012). As such, three seniors and three freshmen participated in the focus group. Of the six participants, four were females and two were males.

**Procedure.** The researcher emailed selected participants to set up a focus group time. To begin the focus group, the researcher reviewed consent and the voluntary nature of participation, explained the study's purpose, and obtained the participants' permission to audio record and transcribe the interview (see Appendix E). The researcher also gave participants a handout (see Appendix F) with brief explanations of a consumer and a learner—to help focus responses on the constructs in the study—and a multiple-choice question to be answered at the end of the discussion, following reflection. The researcher asked a series of questions concerning each participant's perceptions of the ways in which his or her liberal arts education impacted his or her consumer orientation and the complex nature of the relationship between consumerism and learning (see Appendix E). The focus group ran for roughly 45 minutes. After the focus group interview, the recording was transcribed and sent to the participants via email to provide an opportunity for any desired corrections, clarifications, or additional thoughts—a practice known as

member checking (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, the researcher removed any identifying details and randomly assigned each participant a number in place of his or her name.

**Analysis.** The data from the open-ended responses was explored and used to develop codes (Creswell, 2012). The researcher first explored the data to attain a general sense and then coded the data. As Creswell explained, the researcher “divide[d] [data] into text or image segments, label[ed] the segments with codes, examine[d] codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse[d] these codes into broad themes” (p. 243). In doing so, the researcher began to make sense of the data to answer the research questions.

### **Mixed Method Analysis**

Conventions of embedded design analysis propose quantitative and qualitative data be analyzed separately because of the different questions reflected in the data sets (Creswell, 2012). As such, the unique components of the proposed study—the quantitative correlation and the exploratory open-ended questions and focus group interview—were analyzed individually as described. Though analyzed separately, embedded design analysis holds the “results of the two . . . can be interpreted together [to understand] how one reinforces the other or complements the other” (p. 553).

By employing a mixed method approach and analyses, the researcher sought to enhance the accuracy of the study through triangulation (Creswell, 2012). “The process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection,” triangulation ensures the accuracy and credibility of research (p. 259). Creswell pointed out how, by integrating data bearing on the same phenomenon, weaknesses in either individual method are reduced. Consequently, the researcher evaluated all data before presenting implications and drawing conclusions.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The results from the current study include a quantitative analysis of the relationship between consumerism and learning along with time spent at a liberal arts institution. Calculations include descriptive statistics, correlations, and a means comparison to answer the research questions. Furthermore, the subsequent qualitative findings explore the otherwise complex consumer-learner paradox partially revealed by the quantitative results. The qualitative findings include a series of themes emerging out of both open-ended responses and interviews, with those themes falling into two distinct categories: consumer orientation and contributing factors and learner identity and contributing factors. Finally, weighing both quantitative and qualitative data together in a mixed analysis leads to the identification of the essence of the research.

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

The quantitative survey sought to answer the research questions through statistical analysis. Results were used to help answer the first research question—“What is the relationship between consumerism and student learning at a liberal arts university?”—and the subsequent question—“Is there a relationship between a consumer orientation and time spent at a liberal arts institution?” Based on the review of the literature, the researcher expected a strong inverse relationship between consumer orientation and learner identity. Given the relationship between consumerism and learning, the

researcher also expected to observe a measurable shift in students' approaches to education from freshmen to senior year—namely, a decreased consumer orientation due to increased learning. However, the results revealed neither.

**Descriptive Statistics.** The survey data was collected and descriptive statistics (see Table 1) were generated as a means of making meaning of the responses. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable in the study. Numerical values were assigned to categorical data for the following variables: Major (0=non-STEM, 1=STEM), Year (0=Freshman, 1=Senior), College GPA and GPA goal (0=0-2.0, 1=2.1-2.5, 2=2.6-3.0, 3=3.1-3.6, 4=3.6-4.0), Gender (0=Female, 1=Male), and Financial Responsibility (0=Financial Aid/Scholarships, 1=Someone Else Pays, 2=Shared Responsibility, 3=Personally Responsible).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics*

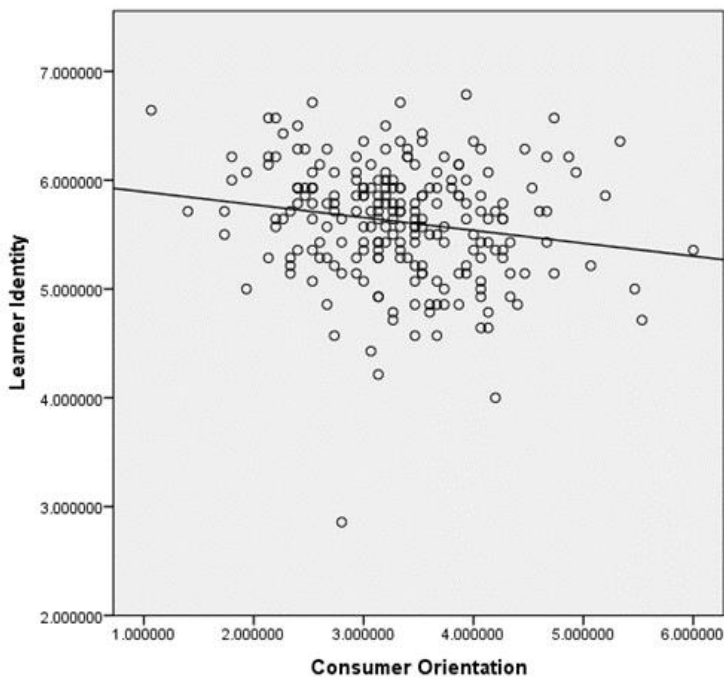
	<u>N</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>
Major	222	0	1	.39	.488
Year	222	0	1	.34	.476
College GPA	77	2	4	3.58	.570
GPA Goal	222	0	4	3.52	.592
Gender	221	0	1	.37	.484
Age	222	18	22	19.27	1.455
Financial Responsibility	222	0	4	1.64	.931
Consumer Composite	222	1.06667	6.00000	3.3342342	.78984198
Learner Composite	222	2.85714	6.78571	5.6171171	.53764833
Valid N (list wise)	77				



Noting the learner and consumer values, the primary finding from Table 1 is clear: students in the study identified more strongly as learners ( $M = 5.62$ ) than consumers ( $M = 3.33$ ). However, in consideration of the scale used—where 0=strongly disagree, 3=neutral, and 6=strongly agree—the fact that students positively identify as both consumers and learners is particularly worth noting. Both learning and consumerism seem present realities for students, but each with differing weights.

**Correlations.** Descriptive statistics prove helpful in analyzing learner identity and consumer identity variables separately. Quantitatively addressing question one necessitates a correlation. The calculated correlation coefficient for learner identity and consumer orientation, as illustrated by *Figure 1*, reveals a weak inverse relationship (-.193). The relationship is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, meaning either consumerism negatively impacts learning or vice versa. Since a correlation does not label variables as either dependent or independent, the direction of the relationship is unknown. Though the correlation reveals little more than the strength and inverse nature of the relationship, the result statistically confirms the presence of a relationship between consumerism and learning.

While the presence of an inverse relationship was not surprising, the low level of strength in the relationship between the two variables came as a surprise. Though weak, the negative relationship between consumerism and learning should not be discredited or ignored. The fact that even a weak inverse relationship exists, particularly considering students identifying positively as both learners and consumers—though to differing degrees—suggests a certain complexity in the way these two variables relate.



*Figure 1.* Scatter plot of consumer orientation and learner identity.

**Consumer orientation from freshman to senior year.** Question one seeks to answer, “Is there a relationship between a consumer orientation and time spent at a liberal arts institution?” As shown in Table 2, an Independent Samples t-Test reveals no statistically significant difference between the consumer composites of freshmen ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=.73$ ) and seniors ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=.89$ ). Freshmen and seniors identify as consumers to nearly the same degrees, despite having spent different amounts of time at the institution. The third research question—“To what aspects of their liberal education would students attribute increases or decreases in consumeristic thinking and learning?”—assumes change over time. Consequently, the question is unanswerable based on the quantitative data alone. The results, which seem to oppose the assumption that students change from freshmen to senior year, are startling. However, because

quantitative data gives no rationale for the lack of change, care must be taken to avoid prematurely interpreting this finding and drawing conclusions.

Table 2

*t-Test for Equality of Freshmen and Senior Consumer Composite Means*

<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>Sig. (2-tailed)</u>	<u>Mean Difference</u>	<u>Std. Error Difference</u>	<u>95% Confidence Interval</u>	
					<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
-.321	220	.748	-.035976929	.111948005	-.256604684	.184650827

In summary of the qualitative data, descriptive statistics reveal that though students identify more strongly as learners than consumers, students identify positively as both learners and consumers. Further, a correlation shows a weak inverse relationship between the learner and consumer orientations. Lastly, a means comparison indicates no significant difference between freshmen and senior consumer orientations.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Analyses of the qualitative data from the open-ended response items and subsequent focus group yields answers to research questions one and two, as well as question three. In answering the research questions, the results of the qualitative data can be used to further explore the findings of the quantitative phase of the study. Given the lack of any statistically significant change in consumer or learner orientations over time, the open-ended questions allowed students to identify the components of their education they thought did or did not impact their thinking as consumers and learners. The focus group gave participants an opportunity to further clarify themes identified in the open-ended responses, as well as help the researcher better understand the complexity between the two variables and the apparent discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative

results. Throughout qualitative data collection, students consistently held consumerism and learning apart from one another as if the two variables—competing for limited attention—exist on opposite ends of a spectrum. Consequently, themes are presented in two similarly distinct sections.

**Consumer orientation and contributing factors.** When asked about consumerism, participants communicated an awareness of the presence of consumeristic tendencies in themselves and others. Additionally, students were quick to identify the ways various factors contribute to their own postures towards education. After coding the data, statements made concerning consumerism fell into two broad themes.

*Theme 1: Consumer narratives.* When asked if they felt the consumer paradigm was an accurate representation of how they view their education, students were quick to point out—regardless of their own views concerning the paradigm presented—the reality and prevalence of this mindset in others. Even though most students felt the consumer description was not true of them, they had no trouble attributing consumer orientations to parents, other students, other types of universities, and even society—particularly in reference to the job market—as sources of pressure to view their education more like consumers. One student responded to the open-ended questions by saying, “The consumer paradigm . . . might be the reality at larger, secular universities, but I feel this paradigm does not describe the values taught and shared [here].” Similarly, another student said, “Many college students and parents have shifted to viewing their college experience as a consumer. I personally do not think it's a fair assessment of my feelings towards education.”

Of 196 responses, 51 participants identified consumer mindsets in at least one category of others. Moreover, all four focus group participants who chose to answer the question concerning consumer influences unhesitatingly spoke about parents. One focus group participant clearly explained, “My family . . . pushes a lot of the consumer, um, perspective on education.” He further stated, “I know my parents were really concerned about . . . getting a degree that has an easy tangible job at the end that will make money worth investing in college,” linking consumerism with utility-centric thinking.

***Theme 2: An awareness of and perspectives on cost.*** At the institution studied, tuition alone is approximately \$34,000. Not surprisingly, the high cost of education was mentioned 81 times by 49 participants. Students are generally aware of the incredibly high cost attached to their education. However, the lenses through which they view these costs vary. For most, the high cost promotes consumeristic thinking because the cost is thought to be exorbitant. For some, the high cost serves as a burden significant enough to detract from learning. One participant, for instance, has to maintain a certain GPA to keep his scholarships, which he said “is impacting my studying. I do care about the grade a little more than I should . . . if I don't have a good enough grade I can no longer afford this institution.”

Affirming the link between grades and consumerism in the focus group, one student stated,

Consumerism came more in the like you need to achieve to the best of your ability. Like, your grades are currency basically. Um, so, like if you don't get a good grade then like you won't be able to get a good job or go to grad school.

For a smaller subset, high cost is a motivator to steward resources well by learning as much as possible. Another student provided the contrasting perspective in saying, “I love learning and want to make the most of this opportunity, not only for my own sake but for the sake of my parents who are paying a lot of money for me to have these opportunities.” Still others—in both open-ended responses and the focus group—justified the high cost as the institution’s means of offsetting operating costs and keeping facilities updated.

**Learner identity and contributing factors.** In response to question one—“What is the relationship between consumerism and student learning at a liberal arts university?”—the qualitative data suggests an explicit relationship between consumerism and learning: as consumerism decreases, learner identity increases. While participants acknowledged the reality of consumerism, most identified more strongly as learners and did not want to be associated with any possible negative outcomes of a consumer orientation. Therefore, students spent more time speaking out of their learner identities than their consumer orientations. Furthermore, as students identified various aspects of their education causing shifts in the way they perceive their education, the themes below provide a basis for answering questions two and three: “Is there a relationship between a consumer orientation and time spent at a liberal arts institution?” and “To what aspects of their liberal education would students attribute increases or decreases in consumeristic thinking and learning?” In response to question three, focus group participants spoke specifically to the fact that their perspectives had changed over time because of attending the institution.

***Theme 1: Evidence of learning dispositions.*** In identifying as learners, students expressed positive learning dispositions with incredible frequency. In fact, 106 participants mentioned at least one learning disposition, and, in total, learning dispositions resulted in a code frequency of 202. Participants specifically mentioned “learning for learning’s sake,” critical thinking abilities, hard work and time spent working, student engagement and responsibility, and the desire for growth rather than achievement. One survey participant clearly articulated,

[This university] has helped me to think about valuing learning for the sake of learning, rather than for the sake of a grade for a good job in the future. I appreciate learning things that may not be useful but are just interesting. This has helped me to dig deeper into my studies and enjoy the learning process more.

Not only did the participant attribute developing a love of learning to her time at the university, but she also made a clear case for how “learning for the sake of learning” opposes the utility-based thinking typical of a consumer orientation.

***Theme 2: Emphasis on community promotes learning.*** Students frequently cited their school’s unique emphasis on community and relationships as one of the major promoters of learning and preventers of consumeristic thinking. In fact, this point was raised 55 times by 43 participants. As one participant explained, “I think less as a consumer of [the] University and more as a member of the community here through the tight social atmosphere I experience.” Though such mentions of community were common, students rarely provided further explanations as to how community decreases consumeristic thinking.

The focus group proved helpful in further exploring the relationship between the two. One of the focus group participants captured the group's sentiments well:

Learn[ing] about a person . . . sparks a new level of curiosity . . . [which] really assists in creating learners rather than consumers. Because if you simply look at a stranger and try to benefit from them and never actually learn them, you're just basically consuming them as an object—as an it instead of a you. I don't think that's ever going to ever create a successful relationship. And, if that's your mindset with the people that you're around, and then you go with those people to classes, and you take that mindset with you, it will inevitably transfer over.

Agreeing, another focus group participant emphasized “communities becoming learners together,” expanding the definition of community beyond students to include “administrators and faculty members and student development professionals.”

***Theme 3: Professors' influences.*** According to 54 student responses, professors promote learner identities by modeling and through personally investing in students. First, students praised professors—sometimes even specific professors—for demonstrating a love of learning themselves. Professors clearly excited about both teaching and their respective subjects serve as models for how students might approach their own learning and professions. Being learners themselves, professors thus indicate a willingness to engage in the community of learners mentioned previously.

Second, students cited professors' unique levels of personal investment and care as incredibly influential in promoting learner identity. One survey participant explained the importance of personal care by illustrating what a lack of care does to learning:



When I take a class and all a professor is trying to do is prepare me for the next exam, that makes the focus less on learning and more on memorizing and forgetting. I lose the desire to learn when I can tell the professor doesn't actually care about my growth either as a scholar or an individual.

Echoing the above sentiment, one student clarified that because professors care, they “go above and beyond to help [students] grow,” which another participant said results in students being “more eager to go to class and more apt to pay attention in class because [they] want to be there.”

***Theme 4: Faith as a motivator for learning.*** Faith proved an important factor in informing students’ emphases on learning. For 47 participants, faith—linking to a sense of spiritual vocation—served as the primary motivator for learning. While some students expressed an emphasis on learning as a means of glorifying God in their current context and role, others emphasized the importance of being learners in the present because of their calling to glorify God in their specific field upon graduation. In considering the role of faith, focus group participants equated learning with truth-seeking, saying, “. . . the pursuit of that truth is, in a sense, like worship . . . and tying that into my faith and saying, like, this is also like a pursuit of God.” Due to an institutional emphasis on faith, participants were more aware of the importance of stewarding learning opportunities and abilities as a means of glorifying God.

***Theme 5: Liberal education.*** Making the connection 111 times, 75 participants communicated the explicit relationship between a liberal arts education and development of a learner identity. Students mentioned how simply talking about and knowing they were attending a liberal arts institution encouraged learning. In response to the open-

ended survey items, one student said, “[This] liberal arts university . . . has helped me think of college less as a product to be consumed and more [as] an experience that helps me integrate all areas of my life and become a more holistic and consistent individual.”

Other students identified specific characteristics of their liberal arts experience—characteristics typical of institutions operating on liberal education philosophies—as important contributing factors to their identities as learners: whole-person education; diversity of people, views, ideas, and perspectives; and courses allowing for exploration of interests. Concerning diverse views, one student explained during the focus group, “[T]hat was a huge part of my growth and like my desire to learn and my thirst for more knowledge and different views than what I had already heard.”

As for classes, students named several specific classes. However, one class came up repeatedly in the open-ended responses and during the focus group. This class—unique to the institution being studied—is required of all freshmen in their first semester and, in the words of a focus group participant, “talks about the Liberal Arts is means in itself. . . . it’s basically a pitch for the learner camp.” Students remembered and appreciated the ways the class quickly shaped or solidified their perspectives on education early on.

### **Mixed Analysis**

The focus group, specifically, afforded a particularly helpful opportunity to explore and better understand the complexity of the relationship between consumerism and learning revealed by the quantitative results and the qualitative themes. When prompted to reflect, the complexity came as no surprise to the participants.

According to a freshman focus group participant, students are torn between what they need as consumers and what they want as student learners:

The two sides kind of have to, like, balance each other. . . . [I]n an ideal world . . . you wouldn't have to, like, balance the want to be just a learner with the need to be a consumer. But, like, realistically, I don't come from a family that can just, like, pay the whole tuition so it's, like, you still have to, like, take that in account. Um, but . . . if I was coming in with just the mindset of a consumer . . . I would want that to be balanced with, like, introducing the ideas of being a learner too. Yea, they both exist and kinda have to.

Another focus group participant, a senior, clearly affirmed the above sentiment that students admiring and desiring to grow learner identities view learning as the ideal:

I much prefer the learner experience and looking at life through a learner perspective. And then at like some point, like, if I could be a learner that doesn't have to worry about jobs, I would prefer that but at some point everyone has to get a job.

Simply put, students are struggling to find the balance between being consumers and being learners. While most students literally cannot afford to be naïve to the consumer realities around them, learning remains the ideal.

As for the lack of change in consumer orientation from the freshman year to senior year in the quantitative data, the qualitative data—as evidenced by the above two quotes—suggests consumeristic pressures are strongest during these two years. For freshmen, the recent choosing of a school was paired with tremendous pressure from parents to think in terms of value. Alternatively, seniors' awareness of their needs for

jobs—particularly considering already accrued debt—weighed tremendously on their minds. Rather than disappear, consumer narratives simply change over the course of time, leading to an apparent lack of measurable change in consumer orientations.

In summary, part of the goal of the focus group was to help clarify and provide an explanation for the apparent disconnect between the quantitative data and the qualitative open-ended responses. When considered apart, the two sets of data seem to reveal slightly different realities. While the quantitative reveals a slight negative inverse relationship between consumerism and learning, the qualitative seems indicate a clear and generally opposing relationship between consumerism and learning. When taken together, a new reality begins to surface. Students largely viewed the dispositions resulting from consumer orientations as opposed to learning and thus struggled to clearly delineate their thoughts from actions and needs from wants when considering their own consumer and learner identities. Students may want to be learners, but the realities in which they exist force them to think as consumers. Therefore, students face an incredibly complex task as they struggle to understand and bring together consumer orientations and learner identity.

### **Essence of Findings**

Considering the data together, the complex nature of the relationship between consumer orientation and learning emerges. While awareness of learner identity grows, consumer pressures change without ever disappearing. Within this paradox, students view consumerism as a necessary but restrictive reality, struggling to fully embrace learner identities despite abundant resources and desires to do so. The tension students face between the consumer and learning paradigms are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Given the previous results, higher education professionals must weigh several considerations: Consumerism is a reality faced by both students and institutions; there is at least some negative relationship between consumerism and learning; and consumer orientations and learner identity do and have to coexist with incredible complexity. Exploring this complexity, the discussion below first addresses differences between the literature's presentation and students' understandings of consumerism and learning. Then, various consumer narratives pressuring and often necessitating students thinking as consumers are discussed. Finally, the conversation shifts toward learning in considering the role institutions play in responding to external consumer narratives with internal learning narratives as a means of clarifying appropriate engagement with each.

Addressing and exploring the relationship between consumerism and learning, along with student perceptions of how a liberal education impacts such mentalities, fills a significant gap in current understandings of consumerism and learning. Asserting the increasing presence of consumerism in higher education, existing literature presents learning and consumerism as fundamentally opposed (Bok, 2003; Bunce et al., 2016; Davis, 2011; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Eagan et al., 2015; Snare, 1997). Considering the existing literature and the current study together reveals complexity in the relationship between consumerism and learning. The inverse relationship between consumerism and

learning revealed by the quantitative correlation at least partially affirms the literature's suggestion that learning and consumerism are opposed. However, descriptive statistics—revealing students identify positively as both consumers and learners—challenge the notion that being opposed means existing on opposite ends of the same spectrum.

Moreover, the literature regularly assumes the majority of students approach education as consumers, further suggesting students comfortably act out of consumer orientations because of decreased amounts of time, effort, and engagement required by such postures (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Marshall et al., 2015; Plunkett, 2014). Again, quantitative data revealing students identify more strongly as learners—supported by qualitative findings—challenge misguided assumptions about most students being comfortable acting out of consumer orientations.

A recent study in the UK concluded, “[W]hile there is evidence of growing identification with a consumer-orientated approach, this does not fundamentally capture [student] perspectives and relationships to higher education” (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 450). Despite varying views on the outcomes of consumeristic thinking, students in the current study perceived themselves to be learners more strongly than consumers. Students are keenly aware of and realistic about the consumer pressures they personally face and are often understanding of the consumeristic tendencies they regularly see in others. Similarly, students recognize when external pressures necessitate consumer orientations, but ultimately, learner identity remains the clear student preference and ideal.

The frequency and magnitude of consumer pressures demand students, at least at times, think as consumers. Regardless of the causes revealed by Zusman (2005) and Eckel and King (2004), the exorbitant cost of education—particularly at a private liberal

arts institution—weighs significantly on students' minds. Manning (2015) suggested the high cost of education may have students questioning the long-term value of investing in a college degree, thus thinking increasingly as consumers. The current study affirmed Manning's suspicion but also revealed how students' views on costs can vary.

While keenly aware of the cost attached to their education, most students find ways to think productively about the high cost. For many, thinking productively means making the most of educational experiences by fully engaging as learners. As such, Delucchi and Korgen's (2002) suggestion that students are more concerned with grades than learning proved inaccurate for most students in the study. Grades were usually mentioned only in relation to retaining scholarships—which help students offset high educational costs. The resulting cycle clearly indicates the troubling tension between consumer orientations and learner identities: students aspiring toward learner identities are forced back into outcome-driven consumer tendencies as a means of maintaining student status—a status providing the very opportunities to act and grow as learners.

Along with cost, parents, increased awareness of a competitive job market, and society in general (Klinger, n.d.) propagate consumer mindsets. Interestingly, student-identified sources of consumer pressures are mostly external to institutional contexts and control. Given the prevalence of external narratives meeting students, institutions must consider the internal narratives being shared with potential and current students.

The role of learner identity develops as students reflect on and identify the narratives communicated by their liberal arts institution. When asked what aspects of their institution increased or decreased consumer orientations, students often equated a growing learner identity with decreasing consumeristic tendencies. Institutions fostering

learner identities help students ascribe a new and greater value to their education. The new value students perceive is not rooted in cost and utility—though such consumer realities do not disappear. Rather, student-perceived value expands to include the comprehensive learning apparent in the purposes and outcomes of liberal education.

Participants highlighted many experiences naturally flowing out a liberal education philosophy as having increased learner identity. A liberal education aims to create well-rounded, thoughtful, continually-learning citizens capable of thinking critically and engaging meaningfully in society (Kahan, 2013; King et al., 2007; Lemann, 2004; Schneider, 2004). Understanding the increased value of such an educational experience, students in the present study embodied various learning dispositions, emphasized the role of community in promoting learning, spoke to the unique and influential role of professors, stressed the importance of faith as a motivator to learn, and clearly articulated the benefits of a liberal arts education to learning.

In short, increasingly present consumeristic narratives and tendencies affect both students and institutions. Given the high cost of college, students would be naïve to ignore the value of their degree in a progressively competitive job market. However, institutions are wrong to assume students' perceptions of and approaches to education are reduced to consumer interests alone. While consumer narratives speak strongly to students, learner narratives resonate deeply in students. Students arrive at college and need help to unravel the complex relationship between consumerism and learning. At first glance, the two seem to exist at opposite ends of the same spectrum. However, students—both bound by consumerism realities and desiring to be learners—must engage consumerism and learning, bringing the two together in a balanced relationship.



## **Implications**

The implications for how professionals and institutions should respond to these realities are vast and perhaps, to a certain extent, complex. However, in bringing together previous literature and the expressed desire of students in the study to grow as learners, several significant and tangible implications arise. Discussion first focuses on how institutions can effectively communicate learning as a value while still acknowledging consumer realities to engage students well. Suggestions then shift toward educators—namely professors—who daily and directly interact with students. Last, due to the student-identified role of faith in establishing learner identity, discussion of implications specifically addresses faith-based institutions.

First, due to the already complex relationship between consumer orientation and learner identity, incongruences may exist in the ways students and institutions approach one another. If an institution approaches a student—who does not identify according to a consumer paradigm—as a consumer, the institution risks negating the student’s role as a learner, possibly offending in the process. Being mindful of how and what the institution is communicating—through language, marketing, and spending—proves important to avoiding such disconnects.

Language is the most obvious form of communication employed by individuals at all levels within an institution. As Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) pointed out, the difference between “having” and “being” is enormous. If telling students to “get” a degree rather than “earn” a degree and to “have” an education rather than “be” a learner, we can rightly expect deleterious consumer orientations to abound. For the majority of hardworking students, transactional language dismisses any effort put forth to learn.

Thus, flippant language may discourage learner orientations by communicating an institutional lack of appreciation for the very learning dispositions they try to foster.

Additionally, the ways institutions market themselves to students communicate something about the institution's perceptions of both education and students. Admissions offices and enrollment committees should accurately communicate a value of learning when interacting with prospective students by highlighting growth-promoting experiences and learning opportunities rather than the best and newest amenities. Students in the study were much more concerned with having abundant learning resources than advanced amenities. To this same end, boards and administrators should carefully assess funding allocations in light of what spending patterns might communicate to students, particularly concerning institutional values.

Seeking to establish learning as a value, institutions must be careful not to dismiss the consumer narratives present in student contexts. Students hear abundant consumer narratives before and while attending college, sometimes even from institutions struggling to clearly communicate in the aforementioned ways. Regardless, students arrive at institutions desiring to be learners. The fact that students—though facing significant influences to the contrary—desire to be learners is worth encouraging and celebrating. However, doing so does not mean silencing or rejecting all semblances of consumeristic thinking. Instead, professionals at all levels must acknowledge the consumer paradigm existing for students and intentionally engage students in conversations concerning how consumerism and learning interact.

As a means of promoting such conversations, an institution might consider implementing a required first-year course exploring various perspectives and approaches

to learning. Less drastically, institutions might consider directly incorporating such conversations into already established first-year experience or transition-to-college courses as a means of helping students evaluate the effects of their own postures toward education. Interacting with students based on student perspectives rather than institutional assumptions may reveal student wants long eclipsed by emphases on responsiveness to market pressures.

Second, educators—most commonly teachers—are distinctly influential in promoting learner identity in students. Students adamantly assert the importance of professors demonstrating care toward individuals and modeling a love of teaching and learning as crucial in establishing learner identity. One participant revealed, “Professors . . . are really knowledgeable about their subjects and they really care.” Similarly, another student praises faculty for recognizing “there’s also important stuff, like, beyond [academics and getting a degree].” Recalling one professor in particular, the student stated, “He’s probably affected me more as a [person] than as a student, to be honest.” Yair’s 2008 study affirms the notion of excellent teaching having more to do with personalization and passion for teaching and the prescribed subject. By caring personally for students, teachers combat consumer dispositions by motivating students to actively engage and provide the environments conducive to exploration (Yair, 2008). As for demonstrating a love of learning for students, Yair suggested, “[M]odel professors are deeply passionate about their topic” (p. 453). Rather than ““go[ing] through the motions’ because they were assigned to teach this or that class . . . they exhibited seriousness and commitment, a sense of urgency and total identification with the subject matter” (p. 453).

Educators seeking to inspire learners rather than consumers must themselves approach their roles with the engagement required of a learner.

Moreover, focus group participants made an interesting connection between the role of professor and the role of community in promoting learner identity. To this end, Parker Palmer (2012) wrote the following in his book *The Courage to Teach*:

When we are willing to abandon our self-protective professional autonomy and make ourselves as dependent on our students as they are on us, we move closer to the interdependence that the community of truth requires. When we can say “please” because we need our students and “thank you” because we are genuinely grateful for them, obstacles to community will begin to fall away, teachers and students will meet at new depths of mutuality and meaning, and learning will happen for everyone in surprising and life-giving ways. (p. 144)

Seemingly, by engaging students with personal care and modeling a love of learning, professors become an integral part of the community of learners so valued within the student experience. As such, professors’ impact on students as learners extends into two different previously revealed themes, effectively underscoring the importance of professors’ own orientations toward education.

Finally, faith—particularly the Christian faith—played a far more significant role in promoting learning than expected. The implications of such findings are immediate and far-reaching for those serving at Christian and other faith-based institutions, where ample opportunities exist for leaders and educators to engage in conversations on vocation and purpose with students. Within the contexts of these conversations, educators can clearly and directly challenge students to think critically about the

importance of learning as a means of living out one's calling, either in the present as a student or in the future as a professional.

Additionally, incorporating aspects of faith into conversations regarding consumerism and learning allows Christian educators to reshape dialogues in helpful ways. For example, Christian educators too—in line with previous suggestions—should acknowledge consumer realities such as high education costs. Incorporating faith expands the conversation to the point that educators can encourage students think critically about faithfully stewarding their time and resources in institutional contexts.

Interestingly, many higher education professionals, not wanting to encourage negative dispositions in students, avoid the topic of consumerism. However, reframing the conversation in terms of stewardship moves educators toward positive conversations of consumerism. Encouraging—not hindering—student awareness of the high cost of education allows space to talk of the responsibility that accompanies opportunity. Moreover, opportunity invokes the idea that education is a gift not afforded to all. Graciously accepting such a gift involves maximizing one's experience by taking advantage of the many ways an institution provides for students' holistic development. Students engaged in education conversations rooted in faith are developed into fortunate maximizers rather than entitled minimizers. Thus, administrators and leaders ought to get excited about the growth occurring when faith can inform and animate learning.

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation in the study is the institution type: a small, private, liberal arts institution. Given the high tuition often attached to private institutions, students involved in the study may be more aware of cost as an influencer of their

approaches toward education. Alternatively, students are aware of the potential benefits of small class sizes and the resulting professor-student interactions when choosing to enroll in the small liberal arts institution. The institution even emphasizes learning by requiring students to take a class highlighting the benefits of a liberal arts education in their first semester. Consequently, students are equipped with the knowledge and language necessary to talk about learning early on. Though a huge institutional strength in promoting learning, immediately equipping students with such language made measuring changes in consumer and learner orientations over time year more difficult.

Additionally, all aspects of the study were voluntary. Students who participated, especially in qualitative portions, likely were interested in the topic. Moreover, the study intentionally included only freshmen and seniors as a means of exploring change in perceptions over time. However, doing so left out current sophomores and juniors whose perspectives may not be accurately portrayed by senior participants' reflections. Lastly, though the researcher employed bracketing to avoid introducing any personal bias, some may be evident.

### **Further Research**

Given the exploratory nature and the limited context of the study at a small faith-based liberal arts institution, many possibilities for future research exist. Future studies could explore the relationship between consumerism and student learning at varying institutional types: large public universities, non-faith-based liberal arts institutions, two-year institutions, and technical and trade schools, among others. Such research would allow for comparisons among institutions.

Additionally, researchers might consider conducting the same study longitudinally to better understand if and how perspectives change over time. Alternatively, both parents and educators play prominent roles in increasing or decreasing students' consumeristic thinking. Gathering data concerning each group's perspectives on education might prove useful in better understanding the narratives informing students' perceptions of education.

Lastly, future research should work toward developing an instrument with more accurate and nuanced consumer and learner scales to better account for the complexity in students' perceptions of education. While many consumer scales exist, finding one that is valid, reliable, and specific to education proves difficult. Moreover, existing consumer and learner scales—not necessarily developed in tandem—often employ overlapping items, failing to account for nuanced differences between the two factors.

## **Conclusion**

Amidst rising tuition costs, a national student debt crisis, and ever-increasing competition for tuition-wielding students, the literature is full of studies exploring both institutional and student responses to increased consumeristic pressures. As institutions begin operating according to better business practices—responding to the expectations and wants of an increasingly demanding student population—many researchers fear the negative impacts on student learning. Within the student as consumer paradigm, education is viewed as a transaction, with an increased emphasis on utility. Such a view of education is thought to undermine the philosophy of liberal education at the core of many institutions in the United States, particularly liberal arts institutions.

While the results of the mixed method study affirm the prevalence of consumeristic pressures, the underlying assumptions of the student as consumer paradigm—that consumerism and learning are simply and wholly at odds—is challenged. The quantitative results reveal that, though consumerism and learning are inversely correlated, many students identify positively as both learners and consumers. Subsequent qualitative findings further explore the complexity revealed by the quantitative findings. Consumerism and learning exist as a sort of paradox: Consumer orientation and learner identity are opposed, yet they do not exist on opposite ends of the same spectrum.

Part of the challenge of the consumer-learner paradox is that neither aspect can be ignored by students in today's educational context nor ignored by higher education institutions. In many ways, students, as well as higher education faculty and administrators, need to acknowledge the very real and pressing consumer realities (i.e., getting a job, paying off debt). At the same time, the majority of students start and end their undergraduate careers identifying more strongly as learners than consumers. Students, recognizing how excessive consumerism negatively impacts learning, explain that, in an ideal world, they would be learners and not consumers.

However, students are currently left trying to find an appropriate balance between the two. Consequently, institutions—particularly those employing liberal education philosophies—have tremendous roles and responsibilities in helping students balance consumer narratives. Though a potentially daunting task, institutional leaders ought to find encouragement in the tremendous opportunities existing to provide students the environments and supports needed to engage and grow as learners.



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## Appendix A

### Survey Instrument

**Consumer (1–15) and learner statements (16–29). Starred items were reverse scored**

1. The main purpose of my university education is to maximize my ability to earn money
2. I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career
3. I think of myself primarily as a paying customer of the university
4. If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at university
5. As long as I complete all of my assignments, I deserve a good grade
6. My lecturers should round up my final grade one or two points if I am close to the next grade boundary
7. I regularly think about the financial cost of my degree
8. \*If I could get a well-paying job without going to university, I would still be interested in studying for a degree
9. It is solely the lecturer's responsibility to educate me at university
10. What I learn in my course is not useful for my future
11. \*Although I have paid to attend university, the university does not owe me a degree
12. If I cannot get a good job after I graduate, I should have some of my tuition fees refunded
13. I think of my university degree as a product I am purchasing
14. I am entitled to leave university with a degree because I am paying for it
15. \*The financial cost of my degree is not something that is frequently on my mind
16. I feel most satisfied when I work hard to learn something
17. I prepare for class
18. I think of myself as being at university to learn
19. \*I do the bare minimum to pass assessments
20. I would choose to study even if I didn't achieve a degree from it
21. \*I am not at university to expand my knowledge
22. When I'm working on a new topic, I try to see in my own mind how all the ideas fit together
23. I take part in class discussions
24. I read relevant sources to learn more about my subject at university
25. I want to expand my intellectual ability
26. \*I am not at university to learn new things
27. I take notes during class
28. Lecturers treat students as if they are at university primarily to learn
29. I make good use of my study time

## Appendix B

### Survey Open-ended Response Items

Please read the following prompt (from Miller D. (2014). *Education and consumerism: Using students' assumptions to challenge their thinking.*) and give thoughtful responses to the questions below.

**“With increasing stridence, college students and their parents frame their educational expectations with a consumer paradigm, viewing professors as their employees, universities as consumer markets, and degrees as commodities.”**

1. What do you think about the consumer paradigm detailed above? Do you feel it is a fair assessment of how you feel towards your education?
2. In what ways has [the] University prompted you to think more or less as a consumer of your education? How has this impacted your learning?



## Appendix C

### Survey Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study on the effects of student consumerism on learning. You were selected as a possible subject because you are either a current freshman or senior at [the] University. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Jessica Martin to fulfill the thesis requirement of Taylor's Master of Higher Education and Student Development program.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of this study is to both understand: (1) the relationship between consumer mindsets and learner dispositions; and (2) students' perceptions how their liberal arts education has affected these mindsets.

**What we will ask you to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete the following survey. The survey has 3 sections with 38 questions in total. Completing the survey should take no more than 15 minutes. Questions will ask you about the lenses through which you view your education and how your education has shaped your perceptions.

**Risk and benefits:** The researcher does not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. You are free to stop the survey at any time, and incomplete surveys will not be used in this project. You may benefit from the opportunity to identify and reflect on how you perceive your education and resulting learning dispositions. The researcher will notify all invited participants when the results of this study will be announced. You may benefit from hearing the results of the findings from this study.

**Your answers will be confidential.** The records of this study will be stored in password protected files until the conclusion of the research, at which point they will be deleted. In any public report or presentation of the research findings, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to stop the survey at any time, and incomplete surveys will not be used in this project. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your relationship with [the] University.

If you have questions: Please contact principal investigator, Jessica Martin, Graduate Student, at [jessica\\_martin@taylor.edu](mailto:jessica_martin@taylor.edu) or 765.998.4374. You may also contact Scott Gaier, Faculty Advisor, at [scgaier@tayloru.edu](mailto:scgaier@tayloru.edu) or 765.998.5391. Additionally, you may contact Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of IRB, Sue Gavin, at [ssgavin@tayloru.edu](mailto:ssgavin@tayloru.edu) or 765.998.5188.

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

Please note: You must be 18 years of age to provide your own consent and to participate in this survey.

By ticking this box, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

## Appendix D

### Optional Follow-Up Interview Informed Consent

[Provided After Submitting Survey]

Thank you for participating in the first phase of this study. You are invited to provide your name and contact details if you would like to volunteer for the second phase of this study.

**What we will ask you to do:** If you agree to the second phase of this study, the researcher will contact 10-15 participants to conduct a 30- to 45-minute interview. The interview will involve the researcher asking you questions regarding your liberal arts education and the ways in which it has impacted your view of education.

**Risk and benefits:** The researcher does not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. You are free to stop the interview at any time, and incomplete interviews will not be used in this project. You may benefit from the opportunity to identify and reflect on how you perceive your education and resulting learning dispositions. The researcher will notify all invited participants when the results of this study will be announced. You may benefit from hearing the results of the findings from this study.

**Your answers will be confidential.** The records of this study will be stored in password protected files until the conclusion of the research, at which point they will be deleted. In any public report or presentation of the research findings, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to stop the interview at any time, and incomplete interviews will not be used in this project. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your relationship with [the] University.

**If you have questions:** Please contact principal investigator, Jessica Martin, Graduate Student, at [jessica\\_martin@taylor.edu](mailto:jessica_martin@taylor.edu) or 765.998.4374. You may also contact Scott Gaier, Faculty Advisor, at [scgaier@tayloru.edu](mailto:scgaier@tayloru.edu) or 765.998.5391. Additionally, you may contact Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of IRB, Sue Gavin, at [ssgavin@tayloru.edu](mailto:ssgavin@tayloru.edu) or 765.998.5188.

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

**By providing my name and contact details, I volunteer to be contacted for an interview and participate in this research study:**

Name  
Phone Number  
Email Address

## Appendix E

### Focus Group Protocol

[Greet students as they arrive.]

#### **Introductions, purpose of the focus group, and thanking participants.**

**Informed consent.** [Remind students providing contact info served as consent. Copy of form available.]

- This is part of a larger study.
- Risks are minimal. Please feel free to pass on any of the questions if you do not feel comfortable responding.
- One benefit to participation is that you will have time and space to reflect in meaningful ways on your college experience.
- Your contributions to this focus group will remain confidential.
- Your participation is voluntary. You may choose to leave the study at any time.

#### **Ground rules**

- We want to hear from everyone. One person speaks at a time. Minimize side conversations.
- The session will be recorded.
- What is said in the room, stays in the room. Content is confidential.
- It's ok to disagree or to have an alternate opinion. We want all voices to be heard.

[Begin audio recording.]

Several weeks ago, you all completed a survey—including two open-ended questions—concerning consumerism and student learning. The data from the first part of the survey—where you each answered the degree to which you agreed or disagreed—revealed a weak inverse relationship between consumerism and learning. Then, in the open-ended responses, the inverse relationship was articulated clearly/strongly. You and your peers also revealed an understanding of the various people, things, and ideas that have informed your views of education. I have found the responses to be very interesting and am seeking your input to help me better understand the complex relationship between consumerism and learning, defined on your handout. Please feel free to share your honest opinions, thoughts, and ideas for each question.

1. Can you identify who/what—both internal and external to [the University]—encourage students to think more like consumers?
2. Given that many students do pay a high cost to attend [the University]—what do you as students perceive that payment to be for?
3. What classes or in-class experiences have prompted you to think more as learners?
4. How have your experiences outside of class informed how you perceive your education?
5. How have faculty impacted how you view your education? Specific examples?
6. How does being at a liberal arts institution, specifically, impact how you view your education?
7. Why/how does [the University's] emphasis on community impact the way you view your education?
8. How has your faith impacted the way you perceive your education?
9. Does anyone have additional comments you would like to share as we wrap-up the focus group? Things you thought of after we moved on to the next question or anything I didn't ask about that you think is important?

[Thank students for participating in the focus group.]

## Appendix F

### Focus Group Handout

In relation to education...

- A **consumer** is one who views his/her education as a transaction, emphasizing the practical utility of the goods and services provided. The perspective emphasizes tangible outcomes and places great value on acquiring a degree.
- A **learner** is one who views his/her education in terms of engagement, emphasizing the process as a whole. The perspective emphasizes the benefits of student ownership and development.

Which of the following describes your mindset towards your college experience? Choose up to 3.

- a. I almost always engage my college experience as a learner (see definition)
- b. I almost always engage my college experience as a consumer (see definition)
- c. I prefer to approach my college experience as a learner but the high cost of college forces me to approach it as a consumer
- d. I prefer to approach my college experience as a learner, but often approach it as a consumer because I need a job
- e. I prefer to approach my education as a learner, but feel as though the consumeristic tendencies of others (universities, students, parents, society) often impact my approach
- f. I am careful to actively approach my education as a learner, although, I'm prone to think like a consumer
- g. I am able to approach my education equally as both a consumer and learner and I feel this has benefited me greatly

Please rank your choices in order of significance (1 = most significant, 3=least significant).

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

