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Abstract

This paper examines how the consumer model of education has challenged the academic structure in higher education. Through modeling the interaction of institutional structures and the move to treat students as consumers, forces that promote the decay of academic standards are identified. The article then explores how modification of current structures to facilitate development of a student as "partner in production" model of education can inoculate the academic system and promote student learning. It also suggests why the move by accrediting bodies to require outcomes assessment will not improve learning outcomes until the faculty evaluation, tenure criteria, and student performance measures are properly aligned.

Introduction

This work seeks to identify one of the factors which contribute to the elusiveness of academic quality. It contends that the academic structure, comprised of teacher evaluation, tenure criteria, course structure, learning objectives, and student performance measures, is aligned in ways which tend to undermine the educational goals of the institution. This arose as a direct result of the student as a consumer movement, which evolved in the 1970's. Researchers contend that this movement developed when parents were given buying power as a result of a 1972 shift in financial aid from colleges to students. This resulted in a market like competition for students resulting in the birth of what we now know as the institutional enrollment management office. These offices essentially market higher education as product/service to students/parents who are now conceived of as consumers/customers (Slaughter, 2004). As a result of these market pressures, the academic arm of the college was also forced to shift away from its traditional emphasis on student moral and knowledge development toward external bottom line norms (Komives, 1996).

The institution's adoption of service marketing to sustain enrollment appears on its surface to be compatible with the college's academic unit's efforts to provide students with a quality education. It assumes that students will accept the "inconvenience" of the academic unit's focus on promoting their ability to think critically, what Vandermensbrugghe (2004) argues is the core of Anglo-Saxon university practices, while the rest of campus pampers them as customers. This is a tenuous assumption. It is equally (more?) likely that the college's marketing effort to "sell the college" to student/customers who do not fully understand what college is, will cause students to envision that they are buying a college degree. This problem was highlighted by Susan G. Pederson, (Harvard Dean of Undergraduate Education) when she stated "While consumerism is alive and well, students and their parents must accept that they have entered a

partnership of learning, not an agreement to purchase a service. You can't bestow learning on someone. They have to want it." (Potier, 2001)

Thus in response to the reality of marketing, the Academic unit needs to create structures that ensure faculty and the academic administration treat students as an input in the educational process. It must also try to retain these student/customers while attempting to deliver a service (education) to those who envision that they are buying a diploma. According to Seton, the shift to the student as consumer perspective for enrollment marketing will inevitably lead to the academic component of the campus viewing itself as a service industry. (Seton 2000) The financial pressures to retain customers through enhanced satisfaction will then encroach on the academic quality.

A Tale of Two Professors

It is perfectly acceptable for admissions and campus services to accept the notion that student/customer satisfaction is paramount. However, if the academic unit accepts this model, faculty are placed in a situation dominated by conflicts of interest. Added to their traditional roles to educate and evaluate is the need to satisfy students who until they are educated can not evaluate the product they are buying. If education is exercise for the mind, we can expect student customers to desire a level of mental conditioning far below their potential. To observe how viewing students as the college's customer can invade the academic unit and impede the delivery of a quality education, we will model the polar extremes of faculty behavior on a college campus through two fictional professors:

- Professor Vader, who sets rigorous standards, expects excellence from students at each step, and refuses to accept as adequate lesser achievements.

- Professor Freud, Vader's polar opposite, who creates interesting/non-challenging classes, rewards students for effort even if it yields poor outcomes, and respond to student problems, whether personal or academic, with compassion.

The post 1972 system will more readily value Professor Freud efforts over those of Professor Vader. When education is viewed as a service where the student/customer must be satisfied, it is only logical that a Freud with happy students (customers), full classes, and the free time and energy to pursue his research will be highly valued.

The Scope of the Distortion

Since consumer driven academic structures judge teaching quality based upon customer satisfaction surveys and full classes, academic rigor must suffer. The resulting system encourages faculty to strive to provide student customers with immediate gratification at the cost of quality educational outcomes. Just as in the case of managed health care, where health plans have focused on cost containment, providing incentives that caused providers to neglect or under treat individuals (Havighurst, 2000); the acceptance of the student/customer model by academic units has created incentives for the faculty to adopt policies which undermine academic quality.

In addition to undermining the quality of the product offered, when students receive inaccurate feedback concerning their academic achievements their ability to decode signals suffers. As the faculty focus on creating happy/satisfied student customers rather than academic rigor, students will begin to decode faculty actions as indicators of quality performance. This corruption of their decoding skills will further undermine academic wellbeing in the same manner that it has been found to undermine other aspects of adult wellbeing (Carton, 1999). Once poor achievement is rewarded in an effort to create satisfied/happy consumers, students will use this low quality information as a signal of academic competence. In this way, academic systems that seek consumer satisfaction encourage professors to unwittingly become a disease-carrying vector impairing student ability to evaluate their educational achievement. This parallels the situation experienced within Internet research where misleading incorrect information which appears authoritative is valued highly, leading to poor decision-making (Fornaciari, 1999).

As these experiences compromise student ability to assess quality, they will perceive faculty who uphold standards as impediments to their success and view standards they do not meet as inappropriate. This situation will compound itself, as ill-prepared students convinced of their competence, move into courses with successively higher cognitive challenges. Knowing that they have been certified by a Freud as prepared, an encounter with a Professor Vader will only reinforce a growing campus wide perception that such standards are unrealistic. Meanwhile, we can expect that Professor Vader, who delivers high quality education, will either succumb to the disease or be placed in isolation by victims who flock to Freud. Even the higher real performance which has been documented as resulting from faculty who have higher standards (Figlio, 2001) will probably not offset the false signals generated by faculty who have focused on the broader college mission of maintaining enrollments through satisfying student customers.

Refocusing the system on Academic Achievement

First and foremost the college should recognize that learning must be the cornerstone of the academic unit's role. Part of this is being achieved through the focus on Outcomes Assessment which is being adopted by accrediting bodies. (Duff 2004) Procedures are being put in place which require faculty to evaluate the learning outcomes of their students. This and other measures to improve academic achievement is the result of a realization that as "knowledge becomes central to creating wealth and improving the quality of life, the ability to acquire, develop and use knowledge effectively becomes essential for individuals and societies (Maharey, 2000).

However, without a significant reinterpretation of the service-marketing thesis, the professor's ability to offer students an environment that results in what Davis (1998) and Cope (2003) have referred to as deep learning remains severely compromised. Despite outcomes assessment, faculty continue to be forced to compete for tenure using student satisfaction surveys and class enrollment numbers as major inputs. Thus faculty must still be concerned as to whether students will respond more enthusiastically to a rigorous academic experience or an experience designed to soothe their egos and supply credits towards their degree.

To escape such an undesirable situation, the academic unit needs to get students to accept that they are not the ultimate customer. Instead, students and their professors are working together to create the product we call an educated graduate. As part of the product, students progress through their academic program much like a product passes through in the stages of a manufacturing process. In such a framework, the role of customer is assumed by those who buy the product. While on the surface this may appear to be radical, it could be argued that the employer or graduate institution, or society have always served as customers of higher education. As a result of this shift, Professor Vader becomes an academic hero as s/he attempts to maximize student achievement.

For an institution to truly accept this student as consumer/product model, the academic unit must be inoculated against both the frivolous demands of student/customers and other forces that lead to the creation of incomplete and poor quality products. While such a transformation needs to be pursued by the academic unit, the other functional areas within the college, where students are truly able to discriminate quality, should continue to view the students as a customer. This dichotomy poses an additional challenge for the college, since it must ensure that students adopt the proper role at the proper times.

One Alternative

One possible method for establishing an infection resistant academic structure that will focus both faculty and students on educational outcomes is the articulation of learning sequences. Using Bloom's Classification of Cognitive Skills in conjunction with the learning objectives embedded within individual courses and the curriculum as whole, sequences of student learning objectives can be constructed. When the proper balance between generality and specificity is reached (Sainsbury & Sizmur, 1998) these sequences can then be used by all parties as explicit achievement benchmarks to monitor educational outcomes. For example, in Finance one might argue the following four-year knowledge/taxonomy sequence regarding financial ratios.

	To be developed First Year	To be developed Second year	To be developed Third year	To be developed Forth year
Knowledge	Ability to calculate and understand financial ratios	Role of some financial ratios & use of financial statements	Use of financial statements for control & using financial ratios within that process	Utilization of financial ratios to analyze firm performance and make decisions
Minimum Taxonomy	Information/ description	Simple applications, understanding	Analysis & Synthesis	Synthesis & evaluation
Course	Business math I	Accounting I	Managerial Finance	Cases in Finance

Articulation of each knowledge sequence and identification of the courses responsible for achieving each is part of a pre-inspection of the program. Before we require students to pass through the curriculum, we should be certain that course content and sequence is capable of

providing students with "deep knowledge" as opposed to "surface knowledge." This is critical since professors must commit to the sequence and be confident that they should hold students to the upcoming cognitive and knowledge challenges. In addition, it informs students that rigorous demands are reasonable, and that prior courses offered them the opportunity to be prepared for these new challenges. It also clarifies the tradeoffs between current and future grades that selecting a rigorous class might entail. Once the curriculums content is appropriately sequenced through aligning the learning objectives of each course, those objectives can be used as cognitive and knowledge benchmarks. It has been argued that this is the key to a rigorous system of self and peer review (Bernstein, 2001).

Using these benchmarks, one can objectively examine whether the pedagogy employed, course materials used, and methods of student evaluation/testing are consistent with each course's desired cognitive and knowledge outcomes. One also has clear benchmarks to ascertain if student dissatisfaction with a course is caused by prior course failures as well as providing a context to examine whether the implicit signals sent to students regarding quality are consistent with course objectives. Since either analysis only compares course objectives to those embodied within course materials, without specifying how objectives are to be achieved, it does not tread on academic freedom. Instead, it asks faculty members to live up to the contract they have with their colleagues, the administration and their students.

While meaningful evaluation is achievable through joint faculty/administrative review of syllabi, tests and grade distributions, knowledge and cognitive benchmarks also provide a foundation for student evaluation of teacher effectiveness that is based upon learning objectives. While such a system would extend beyond current measures of student satisfaction, its true importance is its potential to alter student perceptions. As students are immersed in a process that asks them to evaluate a course strictly on its knowledge and cognitive challenges, they are being educated concerning what they are supposed to have achieved. This will help to enhance each student's vision of what quality is, and thus begin the process of immunizing him or her against placebo education.

In addition, the academic unit needs to maintain a level of consistency between faculty professional development requirements and classroom objectives. Efforts designed to enhance a faculty member's ability to support their classroom cognitive missions must be counted as a vital part of faculty development, and faculty must have the time to prepare and teach meaningful classes. To consistently provide educational quality, a balance between classroom activities and research must be maintained. If administrators fail to develop evaluative structures that acknowledge a balance between teaching and research, and count the development of teaching skills as part of professional development faculty will be ill-prepared to and only casually interested in leading students to achieve course learning objectives.

Conclusion

Through the use of objective academic benchmarks that are supported by outcomes oriented administrative structures, it is possible resist the forces which encourage a decline academic quality. Such a structure will serve the interests of students, faculty, and administrators through the incentives it generates to pursue true quality in the classroom. The challenges lie in creating a

system in which faculty and administrators work together to achieve a common quality goal while empowering and motivating students to critically evaluate their achievements. If we do so, faculty will be motivated to offer the quality educational experiences their students deserve and students will be able to recognize the benefits of those experiences.

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