

WHY DON'T UNIVERSITIES DO WHAT THEY TEACH? UTILIZING RELATIONSHIP MARKETING WITH CURRENT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Universities today are struggling to keep their share of the higher education shrinking market and to retain students until graduation. Utilizing relationship marketing to understand the needs and wants as well as the motivation of current students throughout their academic experience is the cornerstone of satisfying them throughout their years in the institution and keeping them for life as loyal alumni. This paper draws on the results of a survey of 535 students in three southwestern universities conducted by the authors using Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation to determine satisfaction and motivation among students at different class standings.

Keywords: Students' motivation, segmentation, relationship marketing, higher education marketing

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions today more than ever are facing major challenges because of decline in student enrollment. This is due to the attitude of prospective and current students toward higher education, the merits of college education versus its cost, and competitiveness among large number of for-profit and not-for profit universities and colleges. Thus, institutions are struggling to keep their share of the shrinking pie and to retain students until graduation and beyond.

While colleges and universities have been learning to satisfy and motivate their students/customers, hoping to retain them, and to measure and manage satisfaction, student populations have been seen as a unified whole. Once recruited and enrolled, students have become a single segment and have not been treated differently regarding satisfaction and motivation. However, students' satisfaction and motivation change over the course of their academic careers much like consumers' needs and wants change over their life cycle, suggesting that universities must use different motivational strategies with the different segments of their current students. Effective relationship marketing with current students will enable universities to deal differently with students throughout their academic career to achieve student satisfaction and motivation.

This paper draws on the results of a survey of 535 students in three southwestern universities conducted by the authors to determine satisfaction and motivation among students at different class standings. Applying Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation, the study concluded that students at different points in their academic experience have different motivations, and thus require different strategies to address their needs, problems and aspirations. Utilizing relationship marketing to understand the needs and wants as well as the motivation of current students throughout their academic experience is the

cornerstone of satisfying them throughout their years in the institution and keeping them for life as loyal alumni.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many attempts are cited in the literature addressing the measurement of student satisfaction in higher education, including analyzing the student life cycle as it impacts financial revenue to the institution [17], social adjustment of students to college life regarding retention [7], and how attitudes created before enrollment contributed to success or attrition [2]. In 1996, Rowley [15] was the first to apply Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation [8] in an examination of educational staff and their motivation. In Herzberg's original model, he identified one group of factors that were responsible for motivating and another group responsible for preventing dissatisfaction among employees; these two groups of factors worked independently from each other, but were linked interdependently in providing motivation. In years following, the relevance and validity of Herzberg's two-factor theory in measuring satisfaction in educational setting has been discussed extensively in the literature, and it was confirmed by a number of studies that Herzberg's model remains not only reliable, but also valid [10] [9] [5] [3].

In 1997, Keaveney and Young [10] used the two-factor framework to develop a new model for examining student satisfaction and retention. They developed the student satisfaction and retention model (SSRM) to examine how the two-factor theory could be applied to students in higher education. The model called for three factors leading to the student college experience and then satisfaction. The factors were: (a) faculty (understanding, accessible, professional, helpful, provide feedback), (b) advising staff (accessible, reliable, helpful, responsive, understanding), and (c) classes (real-world relevance, course scheduling, and project/cases skills). These factors led the student college experience (cognitive development, career progress, and business skills) and contributed to student satisfaction. DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak [5], building on Keaveney and Young's study [10], validated Herzberg's theory and found that students' college experience was positively related to their satisfaction and intention to stay at the same college or university.

Others studied the factors influencing students to leave the institution or transfer to another one [16] [4] [4] [12] [14] [1]. Some students leave for reasons that may be beyond institutional control, such as lack of financing, changing academic or career goals, or personal circumstances; however, many more leave because the institution failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, that is conducive to their learning and educational needs, dissatisfaction with the university, poor student-institution fit, institutional failure to create an appropriate environment, dissatisfaction with the education, discouragement among students due to improper infrastructure, and lack of motivation to do well in school. Moreover, studies found that student motivation was positively influenced by campus relationships with faculty and staff [11]. Essentially, when students were satisfied, the probability of retention and graduation from the same institution increased. Result from these studies, however, suggested that focusing on first-year programs to deliver claims made to prospective students is not sufficient to retain students, and university leaders need a better understanding of the entire four-year experience. College career counselors, advisors, faculty and staff can positively influence student retention; however they have to understand what will satisfy and motivate students – as individuals or in cohorts – at different stages of their academic careers [6] [11].

In 1987, Tinto [18] proposed the dynamic model of institutional departure, stating that student retention was clearly dependent on the student's institutional experiences. Students who were satisfied with the formal and informal academic and social systems in a college or university tended to stay in school. To

the contrary, students who had negative interactions and experiences tended to become disillusioned with college, withdraw from their peers and faculty members, and ultimately, the institution. In addition, the students' experiences and thus satisfaction and motivation in the latter years of their academic careers have long-term implications to the university or college. Students who feel captive in the latter part of their academic careers, dissatisfied and unmotivated, do not transfer to another university due to switching costs in efforts, time, and money, and thus, can't wait to graduate and leave the university. Such a negative disposition among graduates does not serve the university in the long term in alumni engagement.

In summary, although the literature is rich in examining students' satisfaction, motivation and retention, attention has been centered on students' freshman and sophomore years. The present study proposes a theoretical framework of student motivation and retention that reflects the duration of students' academic careers. This model incorporates a comprehensive set of independent variables that are hypothesized to predict student satisfaction and motivation (based on self-reported experiential assessments) until graduation and beyond. The proposed model is customer-oriented as it does not focus on the acquisition of students and motivating them in the first two years, but through every step of the way to graduation ensuring loyal alumni and university friends for life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework hypothesizes that students throughout their academic careers pass through different stages during their freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years with different concerns, problems, and needs at each stage. The authors label these stages as discovery, establishment, engagement, and future-driven, highlighting the different strategies needed to keep students motivated and engaged until graduation and developing long-term/life-long relationships with students as alumni.

Discovery stage. At this stage students are excited about going to college, feel more independent and are transitioning to a life different from high school. Many students move away from home either to a different area or different state and, hence, focus on adapting to their new surroundings. In this stage universities would do best to make that discovery pleasant by meeting or surpassing student expectations formulated during recruitment and orientation. For example, improving and extending advising and guidance services, paying particular attention to the early stages of learning, such as student induction, initial assessment and the establishment of group ethos and identity; close monitoring and follow-up of poor attendance, early identification of under-performing students or students who are "at risk," and early diagnosis of student requirements for basic skills and additional learning support [13].

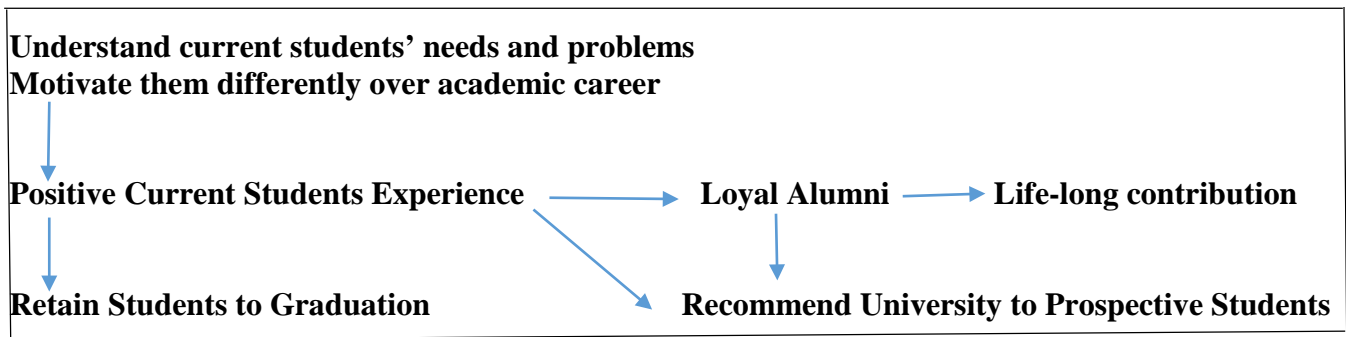
Establishment stage. At this stage students declare their major course of study, have been introduced to the spectrum of activities on- and off-campus, made new friends, and have formed an impression about the university in general. Any unfavorable changes affecting students' lives during their university experience may shake their confidence in the system and lead to a state of rejection that could be detrimental to their matriculation and the university as a whole. Therefore, consistency in support for students through a different set of motivational factors is needed at this stage, especially those that match students' changing expectations.

Engagement stage. Students in this stage are involved in some activities at the university, are familiar with their professors, are working to improve their GPAs from their first and second years, are maturing, and now are thinking seriously about what they will do upon graduation. Oftentimes, students at this stage fall in love with the university and the cultivation of life-long relationships with peers. Here, the

motivational strategies that capture students' aspirations are critical to ensuring retention and graduation from the university. For example, creating student educational experiences that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities, and that enable students to develop their social and cultural capital. Moreover, such experiences allow students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives, enabling them to become active citizens [19].

Future-driven stage: loyalty or divorce. At this stage questions persist among students regarding what they will do after graduation. As students near completion questions arise regarding the university's role in preparing them for life after graduation and their ability to get good jobs or pursue higher degrees. Today, students are concerned with whether they will be able to follow their chosen career path upon graduation and whether they will be able to pay off their loans. Although research has shown that students will continue until graduation even if they don't like the school because of transfer costs, for universities, this stage presents challenges to continually motivate students to remain and complete their studies amidst their overwhelming vulnerable feelings to ensure matriculation and a life-long relationship with the university.

Figure 1 – University-Student Relationship Model



Given the above, the challenge for universities is to develop relationships throughout the four stages via motivating students and satisfying their needs differently at each of these stages so that universities are able to increase retention and graduation rates, and ensure life-long advocates for the institution.

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The authors conducted a survey completed by 535 students from three southwestern universities. The questionnaire asked students to respond to questions about satisfaction, motivation, university experience, and their feelings towards the university. Participants were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with 16 maintenance/dissatisfaction factors, with seven motivation factors, as well as to rate their satisfaction with their university experience, and their attitude toward the university (transferring to another university and recommending the university to friends and family) as a dependent variable. The researchers employed Cronbach's Alpha to measure the reliability of these scales, resulting in a score of over .82 indicating a strong degree of reliability.

A key component of the research design was to determine changes regarding maintenance/satisfaction and motivation factors based upon a student's class standing. When comparing means of the 16 maintenance/satisfaction areas across class standing, results suggested that the level of satisfaction

decreases as students' progress from freshmen to seniors. This difference became apparent when comparing freshmen and seniors.

T-tests were used to determine if the differences were significant for students in different class standings. Results were significantly different for nine areas of maintenance/dissatisfaction factors and included the food quality and selection in the cafeteria, parking, residence hall maintenance/cleanliness and personnel, school spirit, value for their tuition dollar, registrar/records office, financial aid, and library.

When comparing means of the seven motivational factors, it was noted that respondents reported a decline for the majority of factors for the two groups except for their motivation to finish their major and graduate where the mean was slightly higher for seniors than freshmen. To determine if these differences were significant, t-tests were used and revealed significant differences for four motivational factors and included studying hard, achieving good grades, gaining knowledge and developing interpersonal relationships; in each case the mean was lower for seniors than for freshmen.

Results suggested that students' satisfaction and motivations differ throughout their academic lives as found for freshmen and seniors. Seniors were more likely than freshmen to be less satisfied with their university in several key areas (food, maintenance, school spirit, and value), and indicated that university policies and procedures frustrated them. Also, they were less motivated than freshmen to achieve good grades, obtain as much knowledge as possible from their classes, and develop interpersonal relationships with other students; however, they were more motivated to finish their major than were freshmen. Perhaps most importantly to the university, seniors were less satisfied with the value they receive for their tuition dollars, and less likely to recommend the university to a friend or family member. Results showed that as students advance in class standing and move closer to graduation, initial efforts to treat them like good customers and manage satisfaction wear off; in turn, students ultimately respond as disappointed customers often do. The perceived value of their collegiate experience diminishes and they may become less likely to refer "new customers." This is a devastating indictment for colleges and universities whose first line of marketing should be active referrals from delighted alumni. Overall, in many key areas, as students move through class standings from freshmen to seniors, the level of dissatisfaction grows and the level of motivation decreases.

Even with these findings, the implications for higher education are significant. Regarding motivation and satisfaction, the important relationship is between the institution and the student. The main goal of achieving motivation is to create an environment that enables the customer/student to be satisfied and motivated regarding the organization, a condition necessary for creating synergy or well-being, which lies at the heart of motivational psychology. Even if dissatisfied, students will likely be "motivated" to graduate just to "move" on. In this case the student is being moved by the lure of graduation, but is not necessarily motivated. Should dissatisfaction increase, motivation and attitudes towards the university may be severely hampered in the long term.

It is likely that seniors' increase in dissatisfaction and decrease in motivation will affect their future relationship with their alma maters; specifically, the potential for alumni giving and participation in future events. Furthermore, two key areas that emerged related to a student's satisfaction were value and expectations. Since value for tuition dollar, accurate portrayal of the university in marketing materials, and the school living up to the students' expectations were significantly related to the student's likelihood of transferring to a different college or university, it becomes apparent that schools need to manage students' value and expectations better to improve retention rates. However, just focusing on the retention rates may fall short of building that long-term relationship with graduates as alumni. Reason

being, by the time a student is a senior, it becomes less feasible to transfer to another school and graduate on time. In fact, students may even feel trapped. Though they are unlikely to transfer at this point, their dissatisfaction is likely to have a negative impact on the university.

Dissatisfied seniors may become punitive – not through leaving, but in attitude and actions related to alumni issues, future recommendations and negatively perceived brand awareness. Universities must consider strategies to maintain the relationship from freshman all the way to senior year to ensure continuous involvement as an engaged alums.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed students' needs, problems, and aspirations over the course of their academic careers changes from year to year and what satisfies and motivates them changes as well. Keeping in mind the relationship marketing philosophy of “acquire, keep, and grow customers as friends for life,” findings suggest that universities must rethink their recruitment and retention strategies to improve students' satisfaction with their academic experience throughout their college careers. Although much effort is paid to students' first two years in recruitment and retention efforts, findings indicate that university strategies should continue to reach out to them in their subsequent years to minimize dissatisfaction.

Just as companies have identified the need to target and acquire new customers differently from how they manage and grow existing ones, colleges and universities should strongly consider employing similar management and marketing strategies. A one-size-fits-all approach to satisfaction may not be the most effective or enough to win the battle of retention. The long-term risks to alumni relationships, giving, recommendations, referrals and brand awareness are too significant to ignore. Universities today must be customer-oriented and align their organizational structure, resources, processes and procedures to become as such.

Given the distinguishing features of colleges and universities, the value should be based on the long-term interests of students and institutional goals and commitments. It is the quality of the experience and relationship that benefits both a higher education institution and its students. Effective engagement practices may lie in developing programs targeted at specific student groups campus-wide. The following are selected recommendations to effectively reach out to students as they move from one stage to another in their academic careers.

At the Discovery stage, newly arrived freshmen are starting to build their experiences with the university as they encounter for the first time the products and services provided by the institution. Here, university personnel are entrusted to deliver what is promised during recruitment and orientation – while it is still fresh in students' minds. Faculty and staff must be prepared to assess difficulties students are facing and assist them to overcome and solve them as well as provide different learning environments for those who are struggling or with behavioral problems. It is important that those who are engaged with students during this time are sensitive and sympathetic to the fact that students are in a transitional period and strive to make it easier for students to succeed.

During the Establishment stage, students realize the depth and duration of their commitment to obtain a degree. At this stage, the university would benefit by reaching out to this group with targeted messages that encourage and support this goal and to offer suggestions to improve their experience such as identification of student organizations and services. Even though students know their way around, problems still occur, presenting opportunities for institutions to further build relationships with students.

It is critical that universities maintain a relationship with students to build positive attitudes toward it given that students desire a sense of belonging at this stage. Additionally, institutions should continually strive toward providing students with meaningful learning environments to reinforce the connection with the institution and further develop a sense of belonging within the student body.

In the Engagement stage, students have, for the most part, decided their major and established their social life on campus, are learning about possible career opportunities, and are looking forward to enhancing their competencies and skills as they prepare for entering the work force or graduate school. Institutions should partner with students and accompany them along this path with strategies and tactics that enhance that partnership. For example, connectivity with students both in and outside of the classroom through activities, such as small group career meetings, enhances rapport and promotes engagement throughout their academic careers. Additionally, employing inquiry-based learning provides opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and develop analytical skills by choosing activities that interest them. Institutions are encouraged to build in flexibility in learning models so that students continue to be motivated to demonstrate skill and knowledge in their field of study.

At the Future-driven stage, challenges mount for students as they juggle trying to excel in their classes, graduate, and get a job with no clear direction in sight. Institutions should acknowledge such pressure and assist students with information on time management, handling stress, as well as the successful career search. To enhance job prospects, students should be encouraged to do internships to gain work experience and build networking opportunities while applying knowledge gained in the classroom. Services directed to students' job placement should include resume building as well as networking opportunities with alumni. By remaining connected with students during this critical stage, institutions will help minimize students' negative feelings that they are alone in this endeavor and will build relationships that extend beyond graduation and be mutually rewarding.

Overall, findings from the study suggest that university administrators should have a well-defined target market, carefully profile their students/customers, and use database marketing strategies and tactics that speak directly to and interact with individual students. Addressing changing student needs and motivations with different strategies would enhance the student's experience and enhance retention while remaining positive toward the institution. Although this suggested approach of varied strategies is time- and resource-consuming, institutions would be better off (financially) to be sensitive to these differences and address them. Universities have been hesitant to dive into "marketing" to current students; however, students today are consumers with many educational options. As administrators work to recruit and manage enrollment while achieving retention and matriculation rates, understanding that students' satisfaction with the university and motivation to graduate evolve throughout their lifetime at the institution and addressing these critical issues will help the institution create life-long friends and alumni.

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