

As institutions of higher learning become major business enterprises, there is concern as to how this business focus affects their mission of educating tomorrow's workforce.

Balancing Customer Needs and Standards in Higher Education

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Abstract

As major business enterprises, today's colleges and universities may want to consider strengthening their customer-oriented approaches in interactions with students. Institutions of higher learning are grappling with difficult fiscal realities, a new emphasis on students as consumers, faculty challenges in balancing rigor and student course ratings, as well as complex human performance processes. Student expectations, faculty pressures, and competitive markets all contribute to an environment where it's now commonplace to negotiate critical standards in higher learning.

This article examines various influences on institutions of higher learning as they move toward a customer-oriented focus. It also stresses the importance of balancing the needs of various customer groups while continuing to serve as purveyors of educated human resources in a global economy.

Introduction

Colleges and universities are facing major changes as they navigate the 21st

century and make decisions that will not only impact higher education but will also contribute to our country's future competitiveness in the global marketplace. This article identifies and evaluates outcomes from efforts to modify quality standards in higher education. While change is unavoidable and higher learning faces difficult choices, we can choose to make proactive decisions and become agents of change.

The financial obligations of running an institution today are a major concern. While not a new concept, there is a trend for public institutions to redefine their identity as service organizations and businesses.¹ Due to increased financial demands, there has also been a dramatic rise in the cost of attending post-secondary schools.² The Delta Project,³ which focuses on postsecondary costs, productivity, and accountability, points out that while students are paying more of the total costs associated with higher education, less of the tuition-generated revenue is actually going into the classroom. In the 1990s, student tuition paid for approximately 24% of the operating



costs at public colleges and universities, in 1998 that percentage rose to 37%, and in 2005 it was nearly 50%.⁴

Today, institutions rely on increasingly large numbers of students to help balance expenditures. As institutions face growing financial constraints due to recent economic events, there is even greater concern that institutions will defer to the value of the monetary benefits of increased enrollments, especially in the face of fewer state resources. Given the importance of enrollment monies, it is not surprising that universities have become very savvy in marketing their institutions to the student customer.^{5,6,7}

If the focus is directed at attracting larger numbers of potential students even when it is necessary to modify admission standards, there is an associated risk of also negotiating academic standards to create easier courses and modify academic requirements.¹ The reputation of the institution becomes the most costly casualty of all when academic standards that underlie scholarly integrity are compromised.^{1,8}

Post-Secondary Students as Consumers

While there are heightened efforts in attracting and retaining student customers, today institutions are also dealing with students who may view the world differently than their predecessors. Some students enter college without ever having the opportunity to face adversity on their own, and as a result they fail to develop skills in facing challenges that will serve them in life.⁹ Students from the millennial generation frequently see themselves as unique, and they often have very specific expectancies that their needs/wants will be met.¹⁰ There is sometimes an expectancy that if they are not doing well in the coursework there should be a modification in the standards of performance to help them to maintain high grade averages. In this regard the “student consumer” wants to dictate the grade desired and the educational provider is to find some way to allow that grade to be achieved—even if it means altering the program of study.¹¹

If you overlay this ego-oriented viewpoint onto the world map, the perspective changes. The United States is failing to keep pace with other countries in producing graduates, and we will not be able to compete successfully in a global economy unless these gaps are addressed.^{4,8} This

trend is especially apparent in fields such as engineering.^{12,13,14,15,16}

Business and industry cite lack of self-discipline and poor communication skills as two major weaknesses for U.S. college graduates entering the workforce.⁸ When faculty are willing to negotiate academic standards with students, they play a role in promoting these weaknesses.¹⁷ Areas of negotiation with faculty include, but are not limited to:

- The expectation to arrive to class on time.
- Academic integrity.
- The time necessary to do tasks well.
- Competency standards for oral and written communication.
- The expectation that assignments are completed in a timely manner.
- Grade inflation.
- Tolerance for work that is not up to quality standards.⁸

Post-Secondary Faculty—the Challenges

Higher education faculty members are also facing challenges, one of which is the balance of class rigor and student course ratings. Universities typically take into account student ratings of professors in promotion and tenure decisions, merit raises, and other professional considerations.^{18,19,20} While there is wide variation in how influential student ratings are in impacting faculty’s careers, there is no doubt that they do carry weight.^{19,20} Faculty who challenge students to engage in critical thinking and move beyond rote memory may meet with resistance from students, and, if the faculty member is reluctant to negotiate work standards, he/she risks punishment with lower student ratings.⁸ When institutions use student evaluations to help make decisions regarding hiring, assigning courses, scheduling, and offering academic support to faculty, it is little wonder that professors may feel compelled to negotiate course standards in exchange for higher student ratings, especially if they are not tenured.

Another faculty-related issue is the role of faculty in ensuring positive student learning outcomes. Twenty years ago the federal government charged higher education accrediting agencies with ensuring that institutions developed and implemented student-learning outcome assessments.^{21,22,23} The results were less than satisfactory with Houston²³ noting 20 years later that there is

“limited evidence of positive effects on the quality of core processes of teaching and learning.” He further explains that achievements in quality assurance are minimal, primarily due to limited involvement by faculty. While developing ways of assessing positive learning outcomes is not an easy task, there have been attempts by various faculty members to modify classes from the typical lecture format to engage students in more active learning with positive results.^{24,25,26} The assurance of quality student outcomes in higher education should be a priority, but to date, institutions are lagging well behind in addressing this issue.^{1,8,23}

Quality Human Performance—the Requirements

A key component of quality in teaching and learning involves quality human performance by the learner. Substantial financial outlays by companies and the government for training are made in attempts to address problems in the quality of human performance. These efforts have met with minimal success, and major gaps in the standards to which humans have been trained and their resulting performance remain.^{27,28} Swart and Duncan²⁹ note that the expected performance in a work setting is generally dictated by a set of valid and appropriate expectations and is attained through proper education and training. When performance consistently adheres to the appropriate expectations, then quality human performance is achieved. If there is a discrepancy in performance and appropriate expectations, then it must be investigated, causes identified, and appropriate corrective action taken.

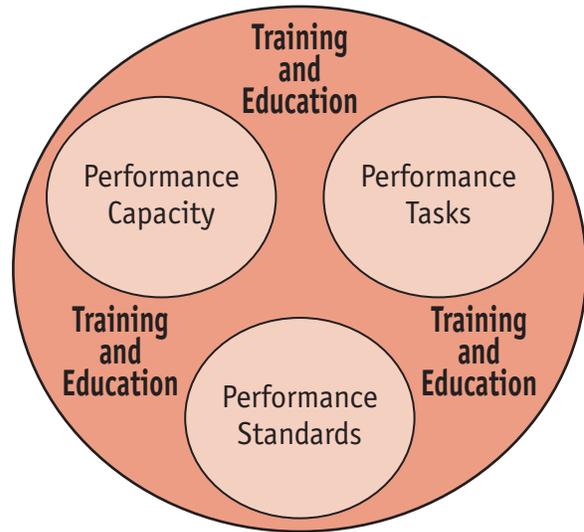
To achieve quality human performance, we posit that three components must be present:

- A clearly defined set of tasks to perform.
- An individual that has the capacity/ability to perform the required task.
- A clear set of standards that define successful performance.

Training and education provide the skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to perform the tasks to standard.

In Figure 1 all three variables are conceptually displayed inside a circle of quality human performance. The link that ties these three components together is training and education. If a person can learn the job and the job tasks are performed to a quality standard, then it is posited that quality

Figure 1: The Components of Quality Human Performance

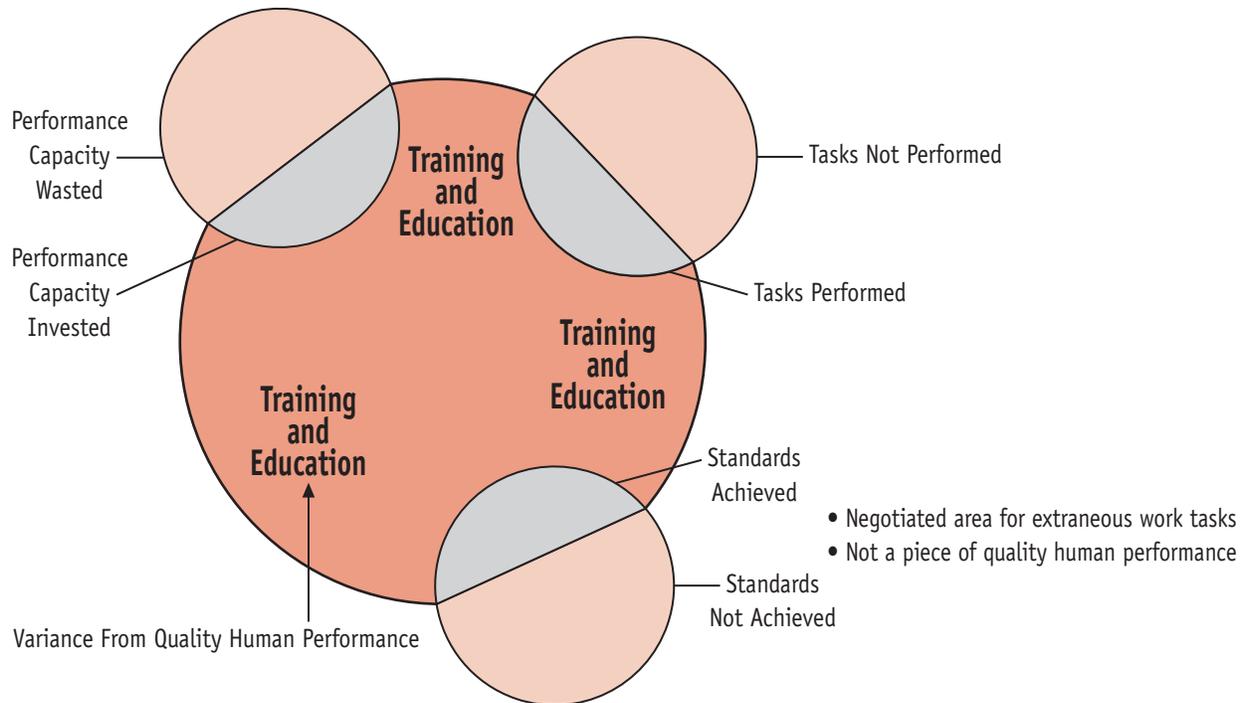


human performance will ensue. In contrast, Figure 2 displays what happens when the standards are negotiated. Negotiating standards creates wasted performance capacity, which is depicted as the variance from quality human performance.

The components are in constant motion: the work to perform (either academic or workplace tasks), the rules of behavior (what it takes to be successful), and the performer. The key to this process is the underlying self-regulation factor. Quality human performance can be seen as a complex process of balances where several factors have to work together to ensure success with one of the main factors as self-regulation.

When the model of quality human performance was applied to college students, Duncan et al.¹¹ found students were fully cognizant of the behaviors necessary for academic success, but they often chose not to engage in these behaviors. They fully recognized the discrepancy in their behaviors (what they should do versus what they are doing), but they also did not choose to engage in self-correction. Instead they expressed the expectancy that the standards of performance would, and should, be negotiated in their favor. This very act of renegotiating the standards of quality human performance suggests that business and industry will not necessarily find future employees who possess the skills expected based on their college academic experience.

Figure 2: Degraded Human Performance



Business and Industry and Higher Education— Focus on Graduates

Customers in business and industry may soon force higher education institutions to take a long and hard look at the “product” they are producing. The Society for Human Resource Management³⁰ conducted interviews with various human resource personnel and senior executives and reported astounding results. The primary finding showed that the United States is not doing enough, fast enough to prepare for the economic future. Students entering the workforce were described as woefully ill-prepared. In discussing what steps were necessary to continue to remain competitive in the global economy, Morton⁸ noted the need for a strong link between academia and industry.

Tired of hiring individuals who did not perform to standard, Boeing announced in the fall of 2008 that it would compile data from past hires to determine which universities were producing a better product and focus their recruitment on those institutions.³¹ If institutions of higher learning are not producing students capable of assuming job responsibilities in industry and business, then these industries and businesses will not continue to hire their graduates. Boeing

may be the first to formally adopt this position, but they will certainly not be the last. Higher education institutions are beginning to learn that businesses are less likely to accept these modifications in standards, which lead to a graduate who does not meet standards.

According to Bok⁸ the learning goals of a student’s major involve demonstrating “a substantial body of knowledge about a particular field, learning special techniques to search for information and analyze it in illuminating ways, and ultimately using these methods to address problems of substantial complexity.” Certainly these are also relevant to performing a job well when a student has been hired for his/her expertise in a specific area. More interesting, however, is the overlap between business and higher education in citing general knowledge and skills that should be present regardless of a student’s major. Some of the skills and knowledge considered important by both business and higher education include:

- Critical thinking
- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Reading comprehension

- Cultural diversity
- Ethics/social responsibility
- Mathematics
- Adaptability^{8,30}

Business should be able to expect students with a college degree to show reasonable proficiency in these areas. On the other hand, those entering colleges and universities should expect opportunities to develop competencies and be held to standards of performance in these areas. Finally, faculty should take steps to ensure these areas are addressed in their courses and are part of the quality assessments for their institutions.

Summary

If colleges and universities focus on satisfying students as their primary customers, they may negatively affect another customer group—employers—because the two customer groups have significantly different ways of defining and measuring expectations. There are no easy solutions to addressing the negotiation of standards that undermine quality human performance. All customers of higher education deserve the best we can offer, as higher education, business/industry, and the economic success of the United States are intricately connected and are dependent upon one another. As noted in the Delta Project,³ the United States is quickly losing ground in the global race for talent. Institutions of higher education, faculty, students, and businesses can serve as contributing architects in ensuring education establishes quality standards. They are all consumers, and they all have a vested interest in maintaining standards.

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