



Consumerism and consumer complexity: Implications for university teaching and teaching evaluation

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SUMMARY

A contemporary issue is the effects of a corporate production metaphor and consumerism on university education. Efforts by universities to attract students and teaching strategies aimed at 'adult learners' tend to treat student consumers as a homogeneous group with similar expectations. In this paper, I argue that consumer groups are not uniform. I use Dagevos' theoretical approach to categorize consumers as calculating, traditional, unique, and responsible. Based on the characteristics of consumers occupying these categories, I describe the implications of the varying consumer expectations for teaching. I also consider the implications for evaluation of teaching and call for research taking consumer types into account when evaluating teaching.

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Introduction

Local, national, and international education has significantly shifted as a result of academic management in universities elevating economic and consumer interests (Gumpert, 2000). Market forces have been reflected in quality assurance initiatives with students becoming customers and academic units being reorganized to reflect market demands (Johnson and Hirt, 2011). Vasilescu et al. (2010) refer to the corporatization of higher education, with an emphasis on business activity. The trend has included commodification of learning and knowledge wherein activities and outcomes are primarily viewed by governments in terms of economic benefits (White, 2007) and by students in terms of instrumental effects (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002). The adoption of business values for higher education (Johnson and Hirt, 2011) contrasts with the traditional enlightenment university with its values of broad scholarship and disinterested pursuit of knowledge (Rolfe, 2012). Having stakeholders who view learning as a commodity does not position learners as scholars to be developed; rather, they become entities in an industrial process (White, 2007).

Public universities are expected to improve access, enhance quality, and cut costs while embracing new information and technologies (Gumpert, 2000). Organizational and individual performance metrics have emphasized efficiency, with internalized quality indicators (Morley, 2005), and indicators of customer satisfaction (Gumpert, 2000). Adopting a customer-oriented perspective as a course of competitive advantage makes universities' success dependent on the delivery of satisfaction to student markets more effectively and efficiently than competitors.

Students, therefore, are a focal point for university planning, strategy setting, and marketing activities (Fry and Polonsky, 2004). Faculty members are motivated to be more productive through incentives and sanctions. In such settings, neither educators nor students are buffered from market forces; student consumers are actively recruited through various forms of communication by universities (Sung and Yang, 2008). Similar to consumers in general, students search for education services based on diverse emotional needs, such as power and belonging (Sung and Yang, 2008). Health science programs are competing for top students and messages conveyed to students by university administration have implications for recruitment. For example, in choosing programs, Australian medical students and American nursing students considered academic reputation as a key factor (D'Antonio et al., 2010; Krahe et al., 2010).

Consumer expectations are informed by explicit promises from universities through advertising and formal communication and implicit promises from image and reputation, including university ranking systems (Sung and Yang, 2008). Such communication elevates consumers' expectations about quality, convenience, service, and low cost (Devlin et al., 2002; White, 2007). For example, some Australian medical students were attracted to programs by subsidized housing, low transport costs, and better extracurricular activities (Krahe et al., 2010).

Despite claims that health sciences students, including nursing students, are viewed as a varied group of learners, studies of students' expectations generally incorporate discussions of implications for teaching that refer to students as 'adult learners', and describe teaching approaches that mostly respond to students' similarities rather than highlighting differences (D'Antonio et al., 2010; Davis and Schrader, 2009; Krahe et al., 2010; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In this paper, I argue that there are implications for teaching and teaching evaluations arising from responding to students as a homogenous group versus a group

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holding a variety of consumer preferences for particular kinds of engagement with teachers.

Theoretical Perspective

Dagevos (2005) argued that consumer complexity includes socio-cultural and socio-psychological influences, with expectations shaped by personal needs, past experiences, personalities, and relationships. For example, nursing students with high social needs may have higher expectations for support and relationships with nursing faculty (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Dagevos (2005) places consumers on continua from individualistic to collectivistic and materialistic to non-materialistic. The individualistic end of one continuum is self-oriented (instrumental satisfaction of personal needs) while the collectivistic end is other-oriented (accounting for social and physical environments). The materialistic end of the other continuum emphasizes intrinsic value (price-centered, product-oriented, high expectations) versus the non-materialistic end that emphasizes extrinsic value (emotional, ethical, or ecological considerations). The continua create four types of consumer images: calculating, traditional, unique, and responsible.

Calculating consumers are late adopters who are individualistic, rational, efficient, effective, competitive, and focused on easy and quick (Dagevos, 2005). Dagevos describes traditional consumers as conformist, conservative, cost-conscious, disciplined, and community-oriented, with late adopters' preferences for stability. Unique consumers are in the minority and value fun, creativity, status and distinction; they are impulsive and rebellious, and want product quality and high technology (Dagevos, 2005). Also in the minority are responsible consumers who are non-competitive, informed, and idealistically engaged, with an emphasis on ethics in terms of family, community, and global issues. They want balance in work and leisure (Dagevos, 2005).

Purpose

Because I argue that students do not represent a uniform group of consumers, with regard to teaching expectations, the purpose of my paper is to use Dagevos' (2005) theoretical approach to categorizing consumers (calculating, traditional, unique, and responsible), to describe implications of varying student expectations for university teaching and evaluation of teaching.

Implications for university teaching

Viewing all students as holding the same consumer expectations sets the stage for high levels of student and faculty member disaffection and anxiety (White, 2007). Assumptions about uniform consumer groups can reduce faculty members' perceptions of the richness of teaching and learning relationships and mentoring. Thus, it is important to consider expectations each consumer group can bring to teaching (see Fig. 1).

Calculating consumers define efficient and effective from their standpoints. They will seek education for instrumental reasons; in other words, activities and outcomes are primarily viewed in terms of job acquisition (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002). For example, American medical students selecting pediatric subspecialties placed more value on prestige, research, and future income than students choosing general pediatrics (Newton et al., 2010). Calculating consumers will be attracted by implicit promises associated with university image and reputation (Devlin et al., 2002). Their efficiency and effectiveness focus makes them more likely to expect clear evaluation criteria, such as, marking templates. For example, 94% of accelerated baccalaureate nursing students placed high value on course and assignment grading criteria but only 49% placed high value on advice from faculty members about how to succeed (Davis and Schrader, 2009). Calculating

<p>Calculating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seek education for instrumental reasons - Attracted by university image and reputation - Expect clear evaluation criteria - Value easy, experienced, and accommodating professors 	<p>Unique</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expect quality, service, and low cost - Attracted by university advertising and formal communication - Prefer novelty in education and technology - Value enthusiastic, entertaining and easy professors
<p>Traditional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage with learning - View grades as part of the service and indicators of time and effort - Prefer tradition in education - Value professors who hold similar values - Value low frill and basic services 	<p>Responsible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feel part of a community of scholars - View themselves as experts occupying moral high ground - Prefer community-based education - Value professors who offer cooperative and outward teaching styles - Value innovative and idealistic teaching

Fig. 1. Consumer images and student characteristics.

consumers' lack of interest in innovation and trust for the person delivering the message increases their likelihood of valuing professors who are easy markers and accommodating. They are unlikely to value innovation and creative, self-expressive aesthetic oriented teaching styles that emphasize internal motivation for learning rather than rewards and marks (Caranfa, 2010). Calculating consumers will have a better fit with professors who do not regard teaching as central to their job descriptions.

Calculating consumers are also less likely to be influenced by state of the art classroom facilities; they tend to equate service quality with efficient and effective delivery of what they need to get ahead. Leadership behavior and organizational control that limit resources for novel and high quality teaching are less likely to influence these consumers' evaluations of teaching quality. Calculating consumers may be more likely to negatively evaluate less experienced instructors (Fries and McNinch, 2003), who they can regard as less trustworthy. These students may be averse to being exposed to new ideas and challenging ways of approaching problems. Students' resistance to new ways of thinking has implications for job satisfaction for professors who value that kind of engagement with students.

Because unique consumers value originality, novelty, and innovation Dagevos (2005) describes them as a trend-setting vanguard that expects high product quality and value for money, along with originality, authenticity, sincerity, and integrity. Fun, excitement and novelty are important but they remain competitive. Unique consumers are more likely influenced by a university's explicit promises in the form of advertising and formal communication (Devlin et al., 2002).

Teaching would be evaluated positively if it fulfills unique consumers' expectations about quality, service, and low cost. They are susceptible to message delivery but are more likely to award high ranks to enthusiastic, entertaining, accommodating and easy instructors (Delucchi, 2000). Unfortunately, students' ratings of high levels of professor enthusiasm and entertainment have not predicted learning (Williams and Ceci, 1997); they actually measure customer satisfaction rather than teaching effectiveness (Delucchi, 2000). Professors with

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