Higher Education: Who Cares What the Customer Wants?
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In June 2005, the Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR) published the report, “Good Enough! IT Investment and Business Process Performance in Higher Education.” In the introduction, one of the study’s authors, Judith Borreson Caruso, explains that:

The ECAR study was designed with the hope of understanding the complex set of issues surrounding: 1) the performance of higher education business processes in higher education; 2) the influence of information technology (IT), leadership, culture, and other factors on process performance. The fundamental questions that framed ECAR’s curiosity in this domain were:

• Are higher education business processes performing well?
• Does investment in IT enhance the performance of these processes?
• What roles do culture, leadership, and other factors play in process performance?
• In sum, in their business aspects, do colleges and universities behave like businesses?

The report goes on, in the best academic tradition to provide a brief literature review of related work, a set of hypotheses, a description of the methodologies employed to collect satisfaction data (online survey of 335 senior college and university administrators and in-depth interviews with 32 senior administrators and IT leaders from 29 institutions), the findings, and, finally, an analysis of the findings.

The processes studied and reported on in this study are, in the order they are presented: financial, human resources, student (for example, admissions and financial aid), grants management, and something called management information and analysis processes. And if you are familiar with Educause, it will come as no surprise that this study was rigorous, well conducted, and the report coherent and well written. Whether the report was of any use is debatable.

MYOPIC VIEW

“So what’s the problem?” you might ask. You might even be saying to yourself that you’d like to read the report to see the results. But I think that there is a problem, both with this report and others like it. Let’s assume you are not in academia and were asked to conduct a similar study in a business environment. Would you not try to frame your study in the context of your business objectives, and then develop metrics that relate to your market, customers, products, or services?

For example, would you study the efficiency of your accounting department only in the context of error rates in processed transactions, or would you...
instead attempt to relate those error rates to something more relevant to your business’ performance factors, such as customer satisfaction, or better yet, profit? Would you study your manufacturing processes only in terms of production levels, or would you try to develop metrics that relate those levels to manufacturing costs—hence to total product cost as a percentage of company profit? What about call center processes? Does it really matter how many phone calls you handle if you don’t factor into your analyses customer satisfaction and product return rates? Should you care how many happy salespeople you have, or should you care that your salespeople are happy because they are making quota and earning good commissions?

Lack of “customer” focus

One of the most striking deficiencies of the ECAR study and others like it is that nowhere in the report is there mention of the customers or services that these processes are meant to support. This is particularly ironic given the study’s fundamental question: “Do colleges and universities behave like businesses?” I have to ask, in the absence of customer/service metrics typical of studies such as these, how much do the researchers really understand about the mission of a university? How can there be absolutely no mention in an examination of support processes—and after all, that’s all

Where to Find the Study

For readers who want to know more about the results of this study that, in my opinion, asks all the wrong questions, a full copy of the report is available by subscription or purchase through the Educause Center for Applied Research at http://www.educause.edu/ecar. Interestingly, respondents to the survey reported the least satisfaction with grant management and management information and analysis functions. What does this mean? If you really care, visit the Web site. You’ll probably find lots of other interesting reports and information there, but please don’t tell them that I sent you.

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they are—of higher education’s service mission of teaching? And for those institutions where research is a higher priority than teaching—something that few college presidents would admit—how is it that the process of grant management is the second-to-last process discussed in the report?

It’s bothersome to see studies like this supported with taxpayer funds; Educause is a member organization maintained by public and private higher education institutions. Educause is not to be faulted for this study, however. It surely understands its customers and its market. And even though it’s a not-for-profit, it certainly operates like a business. Educause is simply providing its higher education customers with the type of services—studies and information—they require. And that’s even more bothersome. If higher education’s administrative functions are using these types of studies, who in higher education is trying to relate these results to the processes of teaching and learning? Is there any relationship between the data collected in such studies and the quality or effectiveness of teaching and learning?

Some might argue that years to graduation is a quantitative metric useful for measuring administrative process improvement. But anyone can optimize that metric by handing out degrees at the beginning of students’ first freshman classes. Another quantifiable metric is the number of graduating students per year. But in the absence of data regarding the quality of those students—measured perhaps by their readiness to be informed and productive citizens—who cares how many people receive diplomas this, or any other year? Unfortunately, few responsible administrators in higher education seem to be asking these hard questions. Instead, they collect meaningless metrics that provide college presidents with infinite data analyses and opportunities for competitive boasting at myriad conferences held in exotic and tropical locales—usually in the middle of the winter.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE STUDENTS

But who is looking out for the students? Are they getting a good education or aren’t they? What is the return on investment for all the money being spent on higher education? For that matter, does anyone even know how to define the “R” in ROI for higher education? We certainly are aware of the magnitude and makeup of the “I.”

A final observation I have about this study is that it did not collect satisfaction data from two of higher education’s most important players—faculty and students. Although I am not a great proponent of satisfaction levels as a useful tool for decision making (except perhaps for market research), what good is a study like this unless it also surveys faculty and students? In other words, who cares if you think your office is running well if your products and services are defective, or not selling at all? Such seems to be the case in higher education.

Parents, students, and other taxpayers spend increasingly obscene amounts of money for an education whose value and quality are now becoming increasingly questionable, especially when viewed next to the quality of the outsourced work done by graduates of foreign colleges and universities. Why are we still funding navel-gazing studies such as this? How are we ever going to compete in this frightening global economy that we, in the US, have created? Maybe the way to start is to acknowledge that American colleges and universities don’t behave like businesses…but should! ■

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