

TLC: a marketing orientation to take students from aspiration and access to achievement

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The Bradley Review is changing the face of higher education. How well universities fare in terms of getting students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds from Aspiration and Access through to Achievement may rely on transforming institutional and teaching practice. Reliance upon the elitist 'Myth of the Golden Pedigree' can no longer be sustained, either in the interests of social justice or in fiscal terms. This paper suggests that a marketing orientation model, which is about meeting customers'/clients' needs, is one way to proceed. Using a case study from an awarded transition/retention unit, the paper will suggest that supporting students and assisting them to become their best, rather than recruiting the best students will become increasingly crucial to institutional success as student demographics become more diverse.

Recently I undertook a series of interviews with senior academics to understand issues they perceive impact on attrition. I was aghast that some remained true to the elitist notion that attrition was the University's fault for admitting under prepared students, and failure or attrition during their first year vindicated this viewpoint. That is, it had little to do with academic practice. Although relatively new to retention and transition, I was well aware that while there is evidence to suggest that student aptitude, 'measured by standard scholastic aptitude tests', is *one* predictor of persistence and achievement (Cope, 1978, p. 4) there is also data to support the idea that 'students with lower entry scores do as well academically as those with higher scores, once engaged' (Wilson, 2009). Moreover, there are compelling cases that suggest that adopting a marketing orientation to Higher Education can potentially improve retention rates by as much as 72% (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007-2008; Raisman, 2008). This paper draws on secondary research in the fields of marketing and education to argue that under the Bradley Review, to realise a more highly skilled and globally competitive workforce, higher education student recruitment needs to look towards educationally disadvantaged groups who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education (Bradley, et al., 2008, p.xi). As such, there will be increasing demands to identify student needs, and to support and foster their achievement once they have gained access. It is internationally agreed that 'the reach, quality and performance of a nation's higher education system will be key determinants of its economic and social progress' (Bradley, Noonan, H, & Scales, 2008, p. xi). This statement comprises the three key components to reshaping higher education: 'reach, quality and performance' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. xi) which have been neatly encapsulated in the theme of this conference 'Aspiration – Access - Achievement'.

Reach deals with policy and leadership whereas quality and performance are largely the domain of academic practice. In the interviews referred to earlier, there was a backlash from academics who felt that the three areas of marketing, recruitment and admissions, which fall under the realm of policy and leadership, have left academics wearing inflated attrition as a consequence of admitting students who they suggest are 'not up to it'. I would suggest that this stems from an elitist notion of higher education which ignores the increasing imperative to cater for a more educationally diverse student population (Northedge, 2003). This idea of

being the elite gatekeepers of their disciplines is both unproductive and will become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of the changing demographic profile of incoming ‘customers’.

There are many compelling reasons to strive for more inclusivity in higher education, not least of which is the potential to demolish stereotypes which hold in some sectors: that to be educationally disadvantaged is to be stupid! It is important to recognise that educational disadvantage has more to do with lack of opportunity than it does with intellectual capacity. It is therefore not a case of attempting to fit square pegs into round holes but rather a squaring off the holes and gently rounding off the edges of the pegs. That is, reshaping policy, leadership and academic practice to enable students every opportunity to succeed.

A marketing orientation to student transition and persistence

One way to proceed is by considering the intersections between higher education, marketing/customer service approaches and their importance to student transition and persistence. Marketing is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and maligned concepts in business (Drysdale, 1999). This is exaggerated in the case of higher education where there is a reluctance to apply business strategies to the provision of education (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007-2008). When we think of marketing, we often think of a vacuum cleaner salesperson with their foot in the door but that type of practice is sales, and not good sales at that! A marketing orientation, in contrast, is a ‘philosophy of doing business, which puts the customer’s needs at the centre of the organisation’ (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007-2008). Given that customer service, a marketing orientation and education all place an emphasis on the quality of service provision, the application of business strategies to education is entirely appropriate (307).

Until the 1990’s the ideal marketing mix was based on the ‘Four P’s’ (Product, Place, Price and Promotion). In the nineties, however, service organisations paved the way to recognise that another ‘P’ (People) was crucial to the mix. Differentiating one business from another had become increasingly difficult using the ‘Four P’s’ and personnel and quality of service become central to realising a competitive edge. That is, organisations came to understand that:

superior customer service is often the key factor that wins or retains customers [and]... Even a good marketing strategy may fail if appropriate people are unavailable to implement the plan. (McCarthy, Perrealt, & Quester, 1997, pp. 643-644)

The resultant centrality of people to the success of an organisation led to an increase in specialist relationship marketers and relationship marketing strategies (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007-2008). While the value of specialist relationship managers in higher education cannot be underestimated, a marketing orientation is a philosophy which needs to be infused *throughout* organisations. This is particularly relevant when we consider that ‘customer service issues account for as much as 72% of all attrition’ (Raisman, 2008).

Customer service should not be confused with pandering or students buying grades. Rather, it is the institution-wide application of principles of student centred practice, where all stakeholders are treated with respect, courtesy and prompt, concerned attention to their needs (Raisman, 2008, p. 259). Furthermore, students should come before personal or institutional goals and if the processes, rules and products offered are not student centred, they should be rethought. Crucially too, we should not cheapen our

offerings with cheap grades (259-260). Of particular significance: ‘The goal is not to recruit the very best students, but to make the students you recruit their very best. (Raisman, 2008, p. 260).

TLC: from aspiration and access to achievement

The idea that we should not recruit better but rather teach better is at the heart of TLC120/3 *Introduction to University Learning*. Murdoch University has a long history of admitting students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. As part of a strategy to assist students to transition from access to achievement, in 1996, the forerunner of TLC120/3 was implemented. TLC120 is a credit bearing unit which emphasises the development of generic academic skills, including academic reading and writing skills, critical thinking and organisational skills. The unit now runs in two streams: Social Sciences and Humanities, and Physical and Life Sciences. The unit/s are designed around two modules: the self, and culture, which resonates with students’ changing understandings of themselves as they transition into university (Northedge, 2003). While there is an element of prescription in the skills taught in each the unit, there is also a requirement for two individual consultations per semester to diagnose particular needs which can then be addressed using a variety of strategies.

Great care is taken to engage tutors for this unit who are not only highly skilled in teaching tertiary learning skills but who are also empathetic and supportive of first year students, emphasising the importance of the fifth P (people) in the marketing mix (McCarthy, et al., 1997). The notion of a supportive, but not pandering environment (Raisman, 2008) for diverse learners (Northedge, 2003) is encapsulated in the unsolicited email from one of our Indigenous pre-entry students who undertook TLC120 as part of his enabling program:

...just a short note to say thanks... I feel I have achieved so much because of your help and clarification...I know you genuinely care about what you do and the people you’re involved with...I owe you people more that you could ever imagine (THANKS)

Such comments reinforce the notion that ‘the relational aspects of good teaching are particularly salient for commencing students’ (Wilson, 2009, p. 12). On this basis, the TLC model and the Griffith model of recruiting and selecting first year tutors on the basis of ‘their approachability and capacity to establish effective, supportive working relationships with students’ (Wilson, 2009, p. 12) offers a working model for one way in which academic practice can take greater account of the diverse transitioning needs of students.

Establishing strong relationships with students cannot be overestimated as an effective teaching strategy which understands that we are *not* merely here to try to fit students into our preconceived notions of what a student should be but instead adapting our practice to what students need. That is, that courteous, considerate and prompt attention to students’ needs should be paramount to our practice in all staff/student interaction, but particularly in our face-to-face teaching (Raisman, 2008, p. 259) for as Garner (2003) reminds us, those teachers who had the greatest impact on us were the ones who cared about us as real people, were enthusiastic and passionate, and displayed a true commitment to facilitating learning. It is no coincidence that these are also the teachers who are most likely to be officially recognised for teaching excellence (Sparrow, 2010). For example, in 2008, Colin Beasley, former coordinator of TLC120, was awarded an ALTC citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning for the unit. The

criteria for the citation were that the unit used approaches to learning and teaching support that influences, motivates & inspires students to learn, and that assessments, feedback and learning support fosters independent learning. These two criteria encapsulate the attitude implicit in Raisman's principles of customer service in that they suggest a preparedness to help students be their best, despite the educational background.

Conclusion

Many factors impact on students' persistence and achievement in higher education. Of the factors they identified they suggest that the academic experience, especially 'teaching, learning and assessment practices' (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009, p. 10) are some of the factors which fall within the gamut of things that teachers have some control over. I would suggest, however, that academics can do more than that, by being actively involved in transition support, curriculum development, social engagement, pastoral care, and using institutional data more effectively. Certainly, the experience of teaching and learning is the domain of teachers but it is increasingly important for us to invest more in our engagement with students and this can be problematic in light of increased workloads and a body of academics who adhere to an elitist model of higher education (Crosling, et al., 2009). Yet, it is well documented that students who feel a sense of connection to their institution are more likely to succeed. The connection is three tiered and depends on 'feelings of identification or affiliation with their School or University [which can be facilitated by] providing opportunities for students to form good working relationships with their fellow students *and* staff' (Wilson, 2009, pp. 5, my emphasis added)

...managers *and* teachers have some responsibility to provide a setting that facilitates students' engagement and learning, that 'gets students to participate in activities that lead to success' (Crosling, et al., 2009, p. 11 emphasis added)

Establishing a relationship with students early in their university education is not only crucial to their academic success and persistence but it enriches the vocation of teaching as well as the learning experience (Garner, 2003; Sparrow, 2010, p. 2). As Garner (2003) suggests, relationships are 'the glue that holds together the process of learning' {Garner, 2003 #580}. That is, the care we show for our students is critical to their success *and* that of higher education providers. As such, we need to break down the elitist notion that in some way we should deign to enlighten them and instead recognise that we are, in fact, partners in learning.

Session Outline

Presenter (10 minutes): Overview of the rationale for a marketing orientation and how it is applied in TLC120

Paired discussions (10minutes): Participants to consider one or more of the following:

1. Issues which may arise from the terminology
2. The potential value and anticipated issues with developing this approach in their own institutions
3. Ways to monitor implementation
4. Ways to evaluate the success or otherwise of adopting such an approach

Presenters and whole group discussion (10 minutes): Draw together the ideas from the participants and discuss potential solutions to any issues that have arisen during discussion

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