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Business or Bust? The Changing Face of Student Affairs

Molly S. MacElroy

As colleges and universities progress further and further into the 21st century, they will continue to grow with an increase in the number of students entering higher education. This increase brings with it, not only a larger population of traditional students, but also a larger population of non-traditional students with differing needs. Therefore, in order to meet the needs of these different populations of students, it may be important to start looking at successful business strategies as a tool for reforming student affairs divisions. In this paper, I will suggest ten rules of business success, established by Sam Walton, founder of the Wal-Mart chain of stores, to use as guiding principles in student affairs work.¹

As student affairs administrators, we have traditionally looked to student development models to assist us in understanding the lives of college students. From identity to intellectual to moral development, several theorists have contemplated the intricate ways in which young adults make decisions while navigating through the academy. These models typically portray the traditional 18 to 22 year-old population as full-time, residential students who inhabit the institution for nine months of the year, leave to go home for three months, and then begin the cycle again the following year.

Meeting the Needs of A New Generation

The Changing Culture of Students

While these developmental theories may have worked in the past, the millennial generation brings with it an increase in the number of students with new experiences from what student affairs professionals have traditionally seen. With an increase in the number of these types of students coming to college, the academy also entertains increases in part-time enrollees with outside commitments such as full-time jobs and families. With such strict schedules, these students expect the academy to act like an ATM, providing their every wish at whatever time is most convenient for them. They are a generation of consumers who are interested in getting the best value for their dollar. Levine and Cureton (1998) found that:

They want their colleges nearby and operating at the hours most useful to them, preferably around the clock. They want convenience: easy, accessible parking (in the classroom would not be at all bad); no lines; and polite, helpful, and efficient staff service. They also want high-quality education but are eager for low costs. For the most part, they are willing to comparison shop, placing a premium on time and money. They do not want to pay for activities and programs they do not use. (p. 50)

In essence, college students these days are paying customers, looking for the best deal possible. They are searching for an institution that will provide them with "convenience, quality, and service" (Levine and Cureton, 1998, p. 50) at low costs. Students view the academy as a business, which needs to serve in the same capacity as other commercial enterprises with a buyer-seller relationship; one in which a product is offered by the seller, and a noticeable level of commitment and concern for the quality of product is demonstrated to the buyer. This generation of students has grown up watching commercial advertisements on television for the latest product at a new reduced cost and in shopping malls with sale flyers around every corner. So, if the not-so-traditional students of today are asking us to provide them with better customer service options, should we be shifting our student affairs focus from student development theory to a business model?

The Changing Culture of Student Affairs

The traditional student affairs division can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger commercial society. As stated earlier, students are now acting as consumers, pricing the best academics and out-of-class experiences to obtain the career in

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which they are interested; all this for the least amount of money. These students are not looking for student affairs professionals to provide them with cultural programs and activities to participate in every weekend because many of them are busy studying or working. As a result, several student affairs divisions are already adopting a managerial focus, in which students are customers and student affairs professionals are managers of the provided services. In this model of student services, the purpose of the student affairs division is to support the academic mission of the institution in whatever ways possible, through lectures, panel discussions, or enabling faculty-student relationships. Creating programs that enhance the in-class learning of students is a perfect way to support the mission of this model. Student affairs professionals can make this happen by improving the quality and efficiency of services, which will lead to greater student satisfaction. This does not mean that student affairs divisions need to completely abandon the traditional models of student development, it just means that the focus should shift to connect with a more consumer-oriented student.

The Hum of Corporate Buzzwords

For some time, the field of student affairs has heard the "hum of corporate buzzwords" (Nicklin, 1995). Outsourcing, benchmarking, best practices, and restructuring are all corporate applications that our colleagues in higher education use almost daily. We use them in conversations with our peers, in staff meetings with colleagues, and in the writing we do for professional journals. Many of these practices have been known to help cut costs, increase customer satisfaction, and help offices run more smoothly.

As our institutions are forced to cut costs, student affairs budgets often seem to be the first on the list to get slashed. We tend to fall outside the realm of providing students with the type of education that is in line with the mission of institutions of higher learning.

For example, Kuh and Nuss (1990), citing Scott, Wards, and Yeomen (1978) point out that student affairs expenditures usually receive even greater scrutiny than those of academic units because student affairs expenditures have been justified more on the basis of idealistic or humanistic grounds than on tangible evidence or results. (Barr, Denler, and Associates, 2000, p. 83)

One way to reduce the cost is to outsource some of the services that we provide in our divisions. Rather than cut our budgets in half, we look to businesses outside of our institutions to provide the services that we offer at a lower cost.

Outsourcing. Outsourcing, as it began, was only a means of reducing costs. Areas that are typically outsourced are dining services, bookstores, and residential life facilities. As the realm of outsourcing grows to include more than just cost reduction, business-savvy individuals must tend to the complex issues of industry.

Even outsourcing, originally intended to save money and reduce bureaucracy, has enlarged the managerial role. Deciding the exact nature of the desired service, assessing competitive bids, choosing the provider, negotiating with unions, communicating the changes, and evaluating the services provided by external firms require sophisticated managerial skills. (Lazerson, Wagener, Moneta, 2000, A72)

While this does not mean that we need to bring in managers to run our student affairs divisions, it does mean that we must train our leaders to be prepared for these types of business tactics. For instance, schools like The University of Vermont and the University of Rochester, who outsource dining services to Sodexo Marriot and ARAMARK respectively, do so to reduce costs and increase customer service. These dining service companies are in the business of providing food and quality services to customers all around the world. Auxiliary units are reaching out to organizations such as Barnes and Noble to manage their bookstores as well.

In addition to these two divisions, the newest management fad in higher education is to outsource residential life facilities. Residential life folks spend a great deal of their time dealing with building maintenance issues rather than on programming and providing leadership opportunities. Two companies that are providing such services to campuses are AIMCO and Trammell Crow. It seems as though this policy could be very beneficial in saving time and money, while allowing institutions to put staff energy in more productive places. Why not use a newly built apartment building with staff supplied to manage and maintain the buildings, allowing residential life to provide resident assistants to retain the student affairs mission of working with and providing leadership for students?

Benchmarking for Best Practices. Student affairs divisions and higher education in general use methods of benchmarking to compare themselves and create best practices throughout the field. Benchmarking is defined as "comparing the cost and effectiveness of one institution's operations to those at one or more other institutions" (Nicklin, 1995). A best practice can then be defined as the process, found after benchmarking is complete, that provides the most low-costs, high-quality service. Institutions that provide effective programs at low cost are those that we, the professionals in student affairs, could consider best practices of the field. Attending conferences and presentations can be an important tool to gather information about best practices. Student affairs professionals are always looking for ways to improve upon job performance and provide better options in dining, health services, and residential life to the students on our campuses. Conferences provide an opportunity to shop around and see what programs and services will best fit with the culture at our institutions.

Restructuring. One last way that we already use business techniques in student affairs is in the process of restructuring our organizations. When budgets are cut and jobs have to go, we must merge employee positions to provide the same services as before. Often, restructuring occurs when bureaucracy becomes a major roadblock to completing projects and setting goals. Reengineering and restructuring tend to come at times of major change, such as the implementation of new technologies into the campus community. For example, as we continuously update the wiring in residence halls, residential life departments require knowledgeable staff to provide networking services in the halls.

While these practices have worked to target areas that cut costs and increase consumer satisfaction, they are not the only approaches we can be taking. The business world is full of management techniques that top CEO's and business founders use and have used in their rise to success.

New Approaches to Student Affairs

Sam Walton, founder of the Wal-Mart chain of stores, has developed ten rules for success that have led him to prosperity in the business world. Although his success has not come easily, many businesses around the world are copying his "empowering management techniques" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>) to achieve similar results. Knowing that we have students arriving on our campuses expecting to be provided with quality services, these rules for success in business may also benefit our student affairs divisions.

Rules for Success

The first rule is to "commit to your business" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). We, as student affair professionals, need to commit to our students and to our institutions. We must believe in these constituencies more than anything else. If they ask us for better services, it is our job to do everything we can to make sure that the quality of food in the dining centers is improved or that hours for the counseling center are made more accessible to meet the demands of students' schedules. By being a presence on campus, showing we care, and enjoying the work we do, we serve as a model for the career-oriented consumers that are attending our institutions, and we build respectful partnerships between students and administrators.

The second rule is "share your profits with all your associates, and treat them as partners" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). By working with our associates, other institutions, we create partnerships in order to provide an excellent experience for all students in higher education. This can be an extremely beneficial tool in our field, since most of the information we learn is disseminated in "best practices" manuals and in conference presentations. When we share our "profits" with others, and treat them as partners in the higher education community, we can offer the best possible options to our students. As well as working with our partners in the field, we should be working with our associates on campus to form partnerships with them as well.

The third rule is to "motivate your partners" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). Just paying our staff members is not enough; we need to create buy-in for our projects and long-term commitments by setting high goals within our organizations. By motivating our partners, we can encourage them to listen to what our customers are saying and work with that information. This means getting back to the basics of our jobs and really understanding what products work and then how we are supposed to provide them to our students.

The fourth rule is to "communicate everything you possibly can to your partners" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). Keeping students and staff in the loop will make them more willing to accept

what we have to offer, and more willing to respect us enough by not responding negatively when the results are not as they expected. Open lines of communication can lead to decisions that have all points of view represented -- staff, students, faculty, and administrators. According to Sam Walton, "the more they know, the more they'll understand. The more they understand, the more they will care. Once they care, there's no stopping them" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). If we can get the various constituencies of the campus community to maintain open lines of communication, event planning and other activities and services that are provided to students will become more seamless.

The fifth rule is to "appreciate everything your associates do for the business" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). I believe this means that we should praise, with some type of reward, those in our divisions who are making strides to increase customer or student satisfaction. It is important to work from those winning ways within respective divisions to create more positive programs and services throughout the institution. In doing this, we create best practices within our own institutions. Not only should we appreciate the traditional models of thinking, but also those created by thinking outside the box, which challenge what is perceived as usual but may not seem natural by all in the campus community.

The sixth rule is to "celebrate your success and find humor in your failures" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). Again, openly praising our colleagues can create the motivation for increasing the satisfaction with student services. If we relax and do not take ourselves so seriously, it is easier for all those around us to do so as well. Inform staff members of their importance in the lives of their customers. If they understand that they make a difference in the lives of students, they will be more likely to work hard, offering additional services to customers. As well as celebrating our success, we must also realize that there will be a certain amount of failure. When we graciously accept the advice of students that we are not providing services that meet their needs, and admit we are wrong, we may lessen the tension and stress that is frequently present in the relationships among students and administrators.

The seventh rule is to "listen to everyone in your company, and figure out ways to get them talking" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). By listening to our buyers (students), suppliers (staff), and other forces within the industry (institutions), we can learn how to help them help themselves. Walton says, "our staff members are the ones on the front lines, the ones who actually talk to the customers. They are the only ones who really know what is going on" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). By facilitating discussions among students and staff members, we allow them to listen to each other and work together to resolve disputes in residence halls and create more product options in the bookstore. As a result of modeling cooperative behaviors and working situations for students, they may walk away with more than just the traditional knowledge acquired from programs and committee meetings.

The eighth rule is to "exceed your customer's expectations" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). I believe this rule speaks to being proactive in our approaches to improving student services. If we constantly listen to what our student customers tell us and make improvements as we go, there will not be a need to wait for a sit-in or huge event to change the way services are provided. By being ready to change when the students come to us or by anticipating their concerns, we can please them by making those options readily available. Listening to our students can provide us with incredible information that we cannot get elsewhere. They live in the residence halls, eat in the dining centers, use the athletic facilities, and visit the health services on their campuses. Students experience our services first hand and can give the most accurate information about what is and is not meeting their needs. If we offer students the opportunity to voice their concerns, if we voice our appreciation for students, and if we use their input to constantly improve, we can far surpass student expectations.

The ninth rule is to "control your expenses better than your competitor" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). The last thing that we want to do is to go out of business. While it is unlikely that higher education will go completely out of business, when yearly budgets roll around, we may experience a continual decrease in funds. In student affairs or student services, there is competition with many other divisions in our institutions for funds. There is also competition outside the academy for some of the same services that we provide. We must be smart about our spending and purchasing; our divisions can still lose money, even if we are brilliant at producing programs.

The tenth and final rule that Sam Walton ascribes to successful businesses is to "swim upstream" (<http://www.refresher.com/%walton>). While the rest of the world is going one way, we should go the other. Though it is difficult to please everyone all of the time, we should try to please all of our students. There is never just one way to complete a task, undertake a project, or even provide a service. Alternative approaches to student services may be valuable. We will never know unless we try. Swimming upstream also means never taking the easy way out. If our

organizations commit to using student satisfaction surveys, we must do something with the data that is gathered. It is too easy to conduct surveys year after year, without putting the information gathered to good use from one year to the next. By taking the results of surveys completed by our students, we can then implement new programs or change existing services, rather than wait another year to administer another survey. Our divisions can not continue with the status quo, but instead must continually improve the products. The more frequently we make changes based on these forms of data, the easier and more fruitful the end product will be.

Conclusion

These rules are not exhaustive and are certainly not final answers to increasing revenue and consumer satisfaction or decreasing customer costs. They offer another way of providing services for students within higher education. With an increasing population of consumer and career-oriented students, we must include in our focus of development, the notion of how to work with students to help them get where they want to be in terms of their life goals. In using techniques from the corporate world, we can commit our institutions to providing the lowest-cost quality education with the most customer service and student-centered focus.

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