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*This qualitative study explored the attitudes of metropolitan university students about the collegiate experience in order to better understand student satisfaction. The resulting theoretical framework on student satisfaction contains three primary constructs: landscape, geography, and consumerism.*

## **A Theoretical Framework for Metropolitan Student Satisfaction**

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the interest in, and assessment of, student satisfaction was primarily the domain of student services personnel (Astin, Korn, and Green, 1987). Latter-day student personnel administrators were motivated more by an interest in the assessment of student involvement in campus activities than with a desire to measure student satisfaction with their education. During that same time frame, however, higher education in America experienced growing pains (Brubacher, 1982). The academy evolved from an elitist institution with a privileged student population to an American social institution charged with the responsibility of accommodating the needs of a more diverse student population. This evolution changed the focus on assessment of student satisfaction from a look at student services to a global critique of student involvement.

Because of this changed focus on student satisfaction assessment, higher education scholars have accelerated their efforts to understand that satisfaction. Researchers have designed student satisfaction models from the borrowed theories of job satisfaction, person-environment congruency, and economic theories of investment. So much of the contemporary literature on student satisfaction, in fact, is borrowed from other disciplines that Benjamin and Hollings (1997) have lamented the lack of “theoretical underpinnings” directly related to understanding the specific phenomenon of student satisfaction.

In addition, most models derived from these theories are grounded in the experiences of students attending traditional two and four-year institutions. A paucity of research exists based on the satisfaction of students attending metropolitan and urban universities. According to Upcraft and Schuh (1996), the first step in the valid measurement of student satisfaction lies in linking the student satisfaction model with the mission of the university. Because of the unique nature of the metropolitan university mission when compared with that of traditional institutions, it is imperative that researchers construct a theoretical framework on student satisfaction grounded in evaluation of research conducted with students attending a metropolitan university. With the purpose of building a theoretical framework on student satisfaction with a metropolitan university, the author engaged 75 students from two metropolitan universities in the southwest, in 11 focus group sessions. During these sessions, she encouraged metropolitan students to discuss their attitudes about college life, the higher education experience, and their plans after college. Using a content analysis procedure, she bracketed the qualitative responses into attitude patterns related to student satisfaction with the overall educational experience.

### **Student Satisfaction: Conversations with Metropolitan Students**

The theoretical framework on student satisfaction with a metropolitan university that emerged from the qualitative data includes three primary theoretical constructs: landscape, geography, and consumerism. Landscape refers to the personal characteristics that students bring with them to the metropolitan campus (Vandenberg, 1971), a landscape that includes students' desire for a community experience on the college campus. It also embodies their need for nurturing and support through peer and instructor mentoring. On the other hand, the geography construct defines those variables that are related to the experience of students once they arrive on campus (Vandenberg, 1971). This geography encompasses the desire for a quality curriculum, quality instruction, and quality faculty. Geography represents the "mind" of education; Landscape represents the "heart."

The third overarching construct, consumerism, incorporates those variables that are related to the student attitude of "I am the consumer. I am paying your salary. Therefore, you must listen to me." The consumerism construct envelops those variables that address student attitudes about the mandatory nature of higher education's relationship to life success, the importance of the college decision, the students' concerns with the higher education investment, and their demand for an educational experience that is convenient to their lifestyle.

### **Student Satisfaction: Landscape**

The landscape of the collegiate experience for the metropolitan students who participated in this study encompassed attitudes related to their understanding of college success, desire for individual attention, demand for finding a sense of belonging, comprehension of maturation, and definition of learning. During the focus group sessions, these metropolitan students talked of the importance to college success in learning effective time-management and study skills. As one junior stated, learning time-man-

agement skills first meant recognition that “procrastination is not a good time management strategy!” These students stressed the importance of setting achievable short and long-term goals with “college graduation as the number one goal.” More importantly, they were unhappy with personal landscapes that found them lacking in the ability to self-motivate for, and stay focused on, the demands of academe.

Perhaps because of their struggles to self-motivate and remain focused, metropolitan students desire a collegiate experience that provides a great deal of individual attention. They want faculty who genuinely care about them and demonstrate that caring through accessibility. They want quality mentoring relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers. They want *everyone* on the metropolitan campus to serve as an advisor for college students. They want all of this because, as one freshman stated, “In college, it seems that nobody cares about you.”

Closely related to this need for individual attention, metropolitan students have a strong desire to find a sense of belonging on the metropolitan university campus. Those who commute to campus every day lament the inability to live and learn with their peers. They regret the lack of time they have to engage in out-of-class activities and to prepare for in-class involvement. Both commuters and those who live on campus hunger for a community bond with other students and, more importantly, with faculty.

As these students search for a connection or bond on the metropolitan campus, they recognize that they are engaged in an important maturation process. “College is a safe place to grow up!” “College is all about self-discovery.” “In my opinion, college should broaden your horizons. It is a place to explore your options.” Interestingly, these students recognized the difference between academic maturity and age maturity. They equated academic maturity with a readiness to learn and expressed their frustration with taking too many classes with peers who were academically immature.

Learning, as defined by these students, must be entertaining, flexible, and hands-on. They expressed a desire for an experience that integrates learning in the classroom with lived experiences outside of the classroom. They were tired of boring college classes with structured lecturing and an emphasis on covering the book. They believed that the current education process produces students who are grade-driven instead of learning-driven. As one student stated, “we want to learn new stuff in a way that engages your mind.”

### **Student Satisfaction: Geography**

Whereas the landscape construct embraces those that reflect a student’s natural search for meaning on the college campus, the geography construct incorporates student attitudes about the concrete educational process that is the operating core of every university. According to Mintzberg (1979), the operating core of any organization represents the center of activity. This core houses the part of the organization charged with fulfilling the mission and objectives of the organization. For these students, attitudes about the operating core of the metropolitan university, and therefore the geography of the educational process, included the importance of a caring, competent faculty and quality teaching. Furthermore, their attitudes included the importance of an expanding knowledge base, a comprehensive curriculum, successful career preparation, and obtaining timely and accurate information about the operating core.

Of all the constructs used to define student satisfaction in these focus group discussions, the two most frequently mentioned were the desire for caring and competent faculty and the need for quality teaching. First, it is important to note that students discussed the need for caring faculty before they talked of a desire for *competent* faculty. Metropolitan students want professors who care about their students, who care about their university, and who have a genuine passion for teaching. But, they also want professors with first-rate teaching skills, those who can help students understand even the most complex concepts. "It is, after all, the professor's job to teach me so that I understand." Related to professorial competency, the students discussed the importance of a competent professorate who are knowledgeable in their discipline and who have real-world experience to inform their teaching.

In direct correlation to the need for quality faculty is the desire for quality teaching. Based on our findings, metropolitan students prefer teaching methods that promote active learning, and build a bridge between theory and practice. They want an educational process that is practical and concrete, as compared with a process that is theoretical and abstract. They believe that the teaching methods employed by faculty should be creative, innovative, and entertaining enough both to capture the attention, and hold the interest, of weary students. Finally, they suggested that college teaching methods should accommodate the diverse learning styles of the adult student.

For metropolitan students, the quality of the faculty and the quality of the teaching methods they employ are of critical importance because of the role of knowledge in the educational process. As they said, college is a "community of scholars, the best minds sharing ideas." "College is a place to expand your knowledge base." "It is a place where you recognize, many for the first time, the importance of knowledge." For many, because the knowledge required in college is much more complex than that in high school, college students are more sensitive to the competency of the faculty and the effectiveness of the teaching method.

They also talked of the importance of a comprehensive curriculum to their overall satisfaction with education. Because, "college is an opportunity to expand your studies in your favorite area," metropolitan students want a comprehensive curriculum offering a variety of courses and a variety of degree options. Juniors and seniors talked of the value of developing a "standardized lower-level curriculum," so that *all* freshmen and sophomores experience the same education. These juniors and seniors shared the frustration that lower-level courses had not fully prepared them for the upper-level courses.

While there was agreement among these students on the need for a comprehensive curriculum, there was little agreement on the nature of its content. Some demanded a college curriculum that was practical and prepared them for a career. They argued the benefits of professional, or instrumental, education as opposed to a general education. Others argued the importance of a liberal arts education that prepared them for life. They wanted an education that would "open their minds and their hearts." Students also debated the importance of the arts as compared with the importance of the sciences in a quality curriculum. While they could not agree on the perfect balance between the two, they did agree that the current curriculum tilted too far in favor of the sciences. Finally, many of those in focused discussions criticized university administrators for diverting much needed resources from academics to sports.

As mentioned earlier, these metropolitan students debated the value of a professional, rather than a general, education. However, regardless of their philosophy on curriculum content, most students agreed that career preparation was an important outcome of the college degree. These students believed that the college degree is a “path to [their] dream career.” They agreed that the college degree sends a message to future employers of the intelligence and trainability of the individual. While these students debated the importance of having more money or more life happiness, they all agreed that the return on their college investment would equate to a better job. As one student stated, “I will see that return the first time I get a better job, or more money, or more whatever, because I have the college degree.”

Finally, in discussing the operating core of the university, students talked of the importance of receiving timely and accurate information about it. According to them, students need constant direction and guidance. They advised future students first to learn how to navigate the college campus, and then to learn how to seek quality information. It was their belief that without quality information, metropolitan university students would not be successful in attaining their academic goals.

These students demanded “just-in-time” delivery of information. Many of them talked of the value of new student orientation, but as one student stated, “they were giving me answers to questions before I even knew the questions. I want an information booth every ten feet so that when I have a question there is someone right there with the answer.” Interestingly, while all students talked of the need for timely and accurate information, juniors placed more emphasis on the convenience of information as compared with the demand by freshmen for accurate information.

### **Student Satisfaction: Consumerism**

Metropolitan university students do characterize themselves as consumers of the metropolitan university. As consumers, they have concerns about making the right college decisions, they have concerns about the college investment, and they increasingly demand an educational experience that is convenient to their lifestyle. In making the decision to attend college, traditional-age students recognize that their decision is greatly influenced by their parent’s desire for them to attend. For the nontraditional student, the decision to attend college is related to a second chance to improve their lives and careers. For all students, the decision to attend college is reflected in the statement of one freshman, “I am in college because I want the American Dream!” Of course, each student had a different definition of that dream and a different academic plan for achieving it. Most acknowledged that “college is not for everybody.” However, they also believed that a “college education is mandatory in American society to be successful.”

The participating students talked of the enormous financial burden of college to them and to their families. Many students worried about how they would pay for college in the short-term and over the long haul. Because of the financial and time investment, they viewed college as a risk. Would they see a return on their investment? Are they getting their money’s worth? As mentioned earlier, they defined the return on their investment as the first tangible evidence of a career or life improvement directly

associated with the degree. On the other hand, they equated their money's worth, or educational value, to the quality of their learning. As stated by one student, "Is it worth the money? Depends on how I answer, 'Did I learn anything new today?'"

These metropolitan students believed that because society benefits from their college degree, it should pay a larger percentage of the tuition bill. Because their perception is that society does not foot the bill for college, the student is the customer of the collegiate experience. Thus, they demanded a more student-centered university campus with university personnel recognizing who really pays their salaries. Because they are the consumers, they want a college degree from a respected university so that their degree has clout in the marketplace.

They also agreed that because of the societal advantage of college, society should invest more resources on the K-12 educational experience to improve academic preparation for college. With this preparation, these students believed that more students would be successful in college. They talked of society's demand for productive citizens as an outcome of the education process. Some believed that society uses higher education to indoctrinate the next generation into the ways of the power elite. As one student stated, "To be a good American, you must have a college degree." With all of these expectations on higher education, metropolitan students talked of the responsibility that society has to the university. But, they also acknowledged that the university has a responsibility to society in being a contributing member of the surrounding community.

With all said and done about the construct of consumerism, there is one final comment from contemporary students that adequately sums their attitude concerning higher education: "At my convenience...". It is the Wal-Mart syndrome of higher education. These metropolitan students, with their diverse and hectic life roles, want an educational experience that is convenient. One student wanted the library to remain open 24 hours a day so that she could put off completing her homework until the "very last minute." They want "front-door" parking. They even bemoaned the fact that the metropolitan university was located in the heart of the metropolitan area that equated to the inconvenience of heavy traffic.

### **Student Satisfaction: Putting it all Together**

The theoretical framework that emerged from focused conversations with metropolitan students summarizes their attitudes about the metropolitan university experience. With an analysis of these attitudes, metropolitan university administrators and faculty can begin to define the parameters of student satisfaction. For these metropolitan students, the resulting framework of student satisfaction has three parts: (a) that which students bring with them to the college campus (landscape); (b) that which students experience in the higher education process (geography); and (c) the consumer values that color their education experiences (consumerism).

Based on our discussions, the landscape of their lived experiences is a portrait of their concerns about their internal motivation to succeed in college in hues reflecting their demand for individual attention and mentoring. It is a landscape colored by the need for a university community that reaches out and envelops them in a strong embrace of guidance and support, and it is painted with a brush dipped in the desire for a

learning experience that is entertaining and active and shaded with the hope that the college experience will bring maturity.

To accommodate this landscape, the geography of the college campus must provide a concrete experience that is embedded in an operating core of caring, competent faculty, and quality teaching with the purpose of easing student acquisition of knowledge. It is a geography that offers students a comprehensive college curriculum with just-in-time delivery of information about that curriculum and about the education process, an operating core that responds to student concerns about motivation, individual attention, and community bonding, and is built to offer learning that is not boring in an environment that facilitates growth and development.

The students in this study offered faculty and administrators a formula for collegiate success of “one part caring faculty + one part knowledgeable faculty + one part quality teaching = knowledge acquisition and comprehension.” Interestingly, as much as they discussed their desire for an active and entertaining learning process, they did not include their own learning role in this formula. Nor did they include a knowledge exploration beyond simple acquisition and comprehension. For all of their lip service to active learning, their desired education process is still rooted in passive learning.

For the metropolitan university student, the landscape and geography of the experience is framed by the values of consumerism. The desire for individual attention and community bond, the demand for an operating core with caring, competent faculty and quality teaching, is tempered by a Wal-Mart mentality of convenience. The collegiate experience has become a consumer process with as much concern about the risk of the college purchase as with the purchase of any big-ticket item. Metropolitan students worry about the return on their investment, and they worry about getting their money’s worth from the education process. The purchase of a college education is just as much a part of the American dream for these students as is owning their first home. The only difference in this and other more routine purchases, is that the metropolitan student believes that society should pick-up a larger percentage of the tab.

Finally, as consumers of the entire K-16 education process, these students regretted a process that had not adequately prepared them for the next level. Freshmen felt that high school had not prepared them for college, while juniors and seniors believed that the general education core had not prepared them for work in their major. Graduating seniors believed that college had not prepared them for the world of work.

Additional qualitative research is needed to fine-tune this framework, based on the experiences of other students attending other metropolitan universities. Quantitative studies are necessary to test, confirm, and prioritize the attitudes and attitudinal relationships presented here. Even so, the framework does provide metropolitan university faculty and administrators with a first peek at student satisfaction for the metropolitan student. Administrators can use the framework to understand the variables that are most important to students about the operating core. Faculty can use it to understand the fears of metropolitan students as they arrive on the college campus and to recognize the importance of faculty to student success. Both faculty and administrators can use it to recognize that there is a link between student fears, their desired higher education operating core, and, for good or bad, their consumer values.

***Suggested Readings***

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