

What About Mutual Drop/Add? Reactions to an Idea for Dealing with Problematic Student-Customers

Brent Smith

Purpose of the Study: Teaching highly motivated marketing students can be rewarding, yet efforts to serve them effectively can be undermined by the drag of unmotivated, uncommitted, or free-riding students. Perceived increasingly as an industry, higher education has integrated broad interpretations of customer concepts that could help or hinder the teaching-learning experience. Hoping to expand and update narratives about treating student as customers, the author invites students to ponder whether and how the business practice of firing customers should be applied in class settings. Taking cues from professional service providers that may fire/replace problematic customers, the author asks, for discussion and reflection, “If students are customers, then what might happen if faculty, as service providers, could retain the most engaged (drop the least diligent) students from a class?”

Method/Design and Sample: 120 marketing students were asked to review *Mutual Drop/Add (MDA)*, an idea that would allow faculty (service providers) to drop/add a number of less/more academically engaged students (customers) in a class. Students discussed, critiqued, and evaluated basic tenets of *MDA*, ultimately providing favorable and unfavorable reactions to it.

Results: Survey results – descriptive statistics and open-ended responses -- show that students generally support the *MDA* idea, finding that it could improve individual performance, barriers to free-riding, overall learning experience, school reputation, and other outcomes. Ultimately, students’ responses indicate that there may be room for a future paradigm shift in how to manage class enrollment and engagement.

Value to Marketing Educators: The findings should encourage marketing educators to brainstorm ideas on addressing students’ motivation, engagement, and performance. Students’ reactions to *MDA* suggest that they (a) welcome opportunities to discuss academic performance standards, (b) want prescriptions to protect and enhance the co-created learning environment, and (c) desire alternative approaches that can stimulate and sustain overall academic quality.

Keywords: higher education, students as customers, peer performance, metaphors

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To deny that higher education is a product and students are customers is to duck the tough questions we should be asking.

— Mark C. Taylor, Author
Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming our Colleges and Universities

Higher education is a dynamic industry whose institutions have implemented a variety of business and marketing principles for attracting students. Consequently, some people have asked and opined whether students are customers. A history of debate suggests that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response would probably not suffice to answer this question properly (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Franz, 1998; Groccia, 1997; Sharrock, 2000). Regardless of the views expressed by scholars, many students *do* view themselves as customers, challenging administrators and educators to provide better “customer service” on

campus, particularly in the classroom. So, *if* colleges and universities are going to treat students as customers, *then* they are obliged to improve their teaching and learning services. At a basic level, students have the privilege of registering for their own courses and classes. They can shop around each academic term (Franz, 1998; Hossain, 2009) for preferred courses, professors, and meeting schedules. On a higher level, students — individually *and* collectively — also demand a quality learning environment, credential, peer network, and school reputation that will serve them well into their future careers.

Academic institutions have adopted marketing concepts as tools for better planning and positioning (Litten, 1980). Lewison and Hawes (2007) suggest that these college and universities require carefully crafted marketing strategies to deal with the “variation in student demographics, psychographics and behavioral characteristics [that] has contributed to the ‘age of

individualism' in which the 'customers as individuals' theme has become a dominant force in defining the higher education marketplace" (p. 18). Schools have drawn cheer and ire for how they see and serve the student market. Per the former, students have demanded more and more online offerings from traditional institutions. As an example of the latter case, students reacted with outrage at Santa Monica College's board of trustees for approving a two-tier pricing plan that would have charged higher tuition for high-demand classes (Medina, 2012).

In the following sections, this article identifies important research questions germane to current discourse regarding students as customers. It presents a rudimentary idea — *Mutual Drop/Add (MDA)* — as a topic for consideration and critique by upper-level marketing students. Next, it details survey responses and reactions to *MDA*. Finally, it provides a discussion of potential insights, issues, and implications related to *MDA*'s ability to stimulate the learning environment, student performance, and other outcomes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We all know the associated catchphrases, "the customer is always right," "the customer is king," "get close to the customer," "customer-focused service," "customer-driven marketing," "customer-based quality," and so forth. But, given our educational mission, does treating students like "customers" make sense? (Franz, 1998)

Marketing educators face ongoing challenges to stimulate and sustain meaningful student engagement in the learning environment. Thus, they are in a unique position to examine existing narratives about how customer concepts could/should be interpreted and applied in higher education. In this study, the author takes an off-center approach asking marketing students to evaluate a rudimentary idea called *Mutual Drop/Add (MDA)*, which would empower both students (customers) and faculty (service providers) with the privilege to commence, continue, or cease their in-class service relationship (Table 1). Admittedly imperfect and untested in higher education contexts, the *MDA* concept takes cues from real-world service professionals who regularly serve and sometimes fire problematic customers/clients (e.g., fitness trainers, venue managers, lawyers, hair stylists). Essentially, the *MDA* concept begs the question: 'If students are customers, then what might happen if faculty, as service providers, could retain the most engaged or drop the least diligent from our classroom?'. Aside from pursuing answers to this question, the author also wanted to stimulate students' reflection and critical analysis on the educational experience they consume and co-create. So, if students demand a strong learning environment, a quality education, and meaningful academic credentials, then what might happen if faculty were empowered to drop those students who would hinder the fulfillment of these

demands for themselves, their peers, or future students?

Taking an unconventional view, this article reflects an uncharted, exploratory effort to understand how marketing students in the United States perceive their status in the rapidly diversifying industry of higher education. Informed by existing literature and perspectives on the topic (see Askehave, 2007; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Franz, 1998; and others), this article presents contemporary insights from marketing students regarding the following questions:

1. Do students believe that they are / should be treated as customers?
2. Are some customers more important than others?
3. While existing drop/add policies allow students to select specific courses or instructors during an academic period, what would happen if faculty were given a similar right to drop underperforming students and replace them with capable ones?
4. Would *MDA* be a good (bad) idea for college/universities to consider? What potential benefits (costs) could ensue from a possible implementation of *MDA* — better school reputation, weeding out unmotivated students, greater appreciation for learning, et cetera?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing Metaphors in Higher Education

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define metaphor as "understanding . . . one thing in terms of another." Thus, one expects that metaphors can help explain the nature of the exchange relationship between higher education (e.g., institutions and faculty) and students (Scott, 1999). However, the diversity of prevailing business metaphors makes it evident that no single metaphor has sufficient explanatory power. So, while it can be tempting to understand higher education in terms of business, the attempt begs some inquiry about whether people have a clearer understanding as a result (Sharrock, 2000). For example, the following business-oriented metaphors point to a variety of different, possibly competing meanings:

- run a school like a business (e.g., operating school like/as profit-seeking enterprise)
- students (their parents/sponsors) are customers (e.g., paying for a retail good or service)
- students are clients (e.g., requesting academic advising for course selections)
- students are products (e.g., processing and branding quality output of production system)
- programs/majors are marketed to students (e.g., promoting commodities to draw buyers)
- college is a philanthropy (e.g., providing greater value than paid tuition actually merits)

Table 1: Overview and Description of MDA to Students

Preamble	Basic Concept
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Virtually all of the students agree that students are customers. ▪ In real business, customers and vendors often have some power to choose and/or refuse to deal with one another. ▪ Mainstream marketing guru Seth Godin suggests that some customers are worth more than others. Some should even be “fired” if they are hurting the brand. ▪ In some cases, customers vie to become or remain affiliated with certain vendors (e.g., conspicuous consumption, high performing pre-K or charter schools). ▪ In the sciences, medicine, law, many students vie/compete to secure privilege of training in particular esteemed courses or working with certain professors/mentors. ▪ Competition is an important value infused into the fabric of our society and culture. ▪ Both successes <u>and</u> failures provide lessons, insights, and motivation for individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Let the student-customer freely choose her/his classes and professors. ▪ ALSO, allow the professor to choose some of her/his (a) classes and (b) students. ▪ Part (a) already happens, does not (b) <u>yet</u>. ▪ Valid evaluation factors include: grades (homework, quiz, examination); class attendance; contribution to class discussions and group projects; etc. <p><i>Basic Design (For Example)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Start course with 30 students. ▪ Near drop/add deadline, evaluate students’ performance based on consideration of key metrics (e.g., attendance, participation, quiz grades) and determine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Keep: Which 25 students to keep? ○ Drop: Which 1-3 students to drop? (Based on lowest performance.) ○ Add: Whether to keep vacated spots unfilled or add/invite qualified students (from other class, wait-list)? ▪ Students dropped from class can register for another class or re-register next term.

Intended Goals and Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Class of students who are more motivated, engaged, and invested in the learning experience ▪ Student confident in their peer’s study habits and dependability ▪ Future demand for quality increases over time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ student reputation (e.g., incoming, current, and graduating students) ○ class reputation (e.g., expectations to meet rigor and demonstrate engagement) ○ school reputation (e.g., among applicants, alumni, and employers) ▪ Pride among graduates who make it through the system ▪ Pride among alumni (i.e., , current and future donors, including yourself) ▪ Higher expectations at admission (e.g., being accepted and staying in quality program) ▪ Demand from prospective employers

Higher education can be regarded as a vital service and important industry within a nation’s society. Business schools, in particular, are expected to educate, train, and develop students in ways that prepare them for the business world. Of course, the choice to become a student indicates that one lacks certain requisite faculties, knowledge, or skills that might be developed or advanced under the guidance of faculty. Thus, while students may be paying for an academic credential (e.g., bachelor’s degree) education, they also need to be prepared to demonstrate competencies expected of people with such a credential. That is, they pay for access to an educational process and faculty handlers that help transform them into better products.

Can the relationship between institutions and their students be properly understood using any of the listed metaphors, a combination of certain ones, or the full complement of them? Furthermore, how far into this exchange relationship should such metaphors be

extended? How can one identify all of the implications associated with the intuitive outcomes suggested by such metaphors? For instance, if the student is a customer, then is s/he always right? As a case in point, Emery, Kramer, and Tian (2001) report that one or more students approached a faculty member in an attempt negotiate a grade change, declaring “I am your boss. I pay your salary.”

Underscoring the impact of the customer-oriented paradigm, Franz (1998) states, “... we find students buying their education and shopping around for classes and majors; our goal as educators becomes attracting and retaining students for our courses. What the students desire out of their college experience starts driving programs. Resources follow students, and departments are rewarded in direct proportion to the number of students (customers) who choose to attend (buy) their classes classes become popularity contests. Pedagogy becomes entertainment ...” (p. 63). The results of such standards can lead to

a significant decline in the curriculum quality, leaving students dramatically under-prepared for the workplace (Jones, 1997; Sacks, 1996).

While institutions of higher education often implement aspects of the marketing mix, the idea of looking at students as customers still needs more examination (Franz, 1998). In this article, we look at the metaphor of the student as customer. “The corollary of the student-as-customer is the academic-as-service-provider” (Scott, 1999, p. 194). Here, the author raises questions about how these marketing metaphors currently are understood and could be implemented in the context of classes at colleges and universities. Like McCullough and Gremler (1999) who attempted an untried and unconventional exercise in engaging students who agree to be “good customers” responsible for their performance and satisfaction, the author speaks *directly with students*, focal players in the provider-consumer dyad for MDA.

According to Arambewela, Hall, and Zuhair (2006), institutions positively impact student satisfaction by developing a quality learning experience, institutional reputation, and marketability of its degrees. As service providers in the business of higher education, faculty members have some ability to affect these drivers of student satisfaction. For instance, Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) suggest that faculty members can help students realize greater satisfaction with their learning by motivating them to manage their own expectations. This article adopts the view that students can be partners with their peers and instructors. Accordingly, it agrees with the idea that students must demonstrate responsibility for their own education (Svensson & Wood, 2007). Students must show to one another their ability, motivation, and intellect to help produce, not merely consume, value contributions within the overall learning environment. Thus, this article attempts to present a case that faculty can be service oriented “without giving the store away” (Desai et al., 2001, p. 143). Indeed, while academic institutions compete to offer attractive service offerings for students, very few institutions effectively communicate that they also expect something in return from those students (Askehave, 2007).

MUTUAL DROP/ADD: CONSIDERING A BOADER BUSINESS METAPHOR

The growth in grade inflation, the near abandonment of Friday classes on many campuses, and the provision of country club-like facilities are three indicators that universities increasingly look at students as customers requiring pampering. The “student as customer” philosophy has created an underworked and overindulged group of future national leaders, something that likely will prove costly in the long run.

— Richard Vedder, Director,
Center of College Affordability and Productivity

Rationale for MDA

While many faculty, administrators, and staff have debated the notion of students being customers, true discourse on this topic has seldom included students. Thus, as noted earlier, it is timely and necessary that students be asked their opinions on the matter and its potential ramifications. Those items are reiterated here. First, do students actually believe that they are customers? Second, do students understand how customers can be treated in the business world? Third, how might students react to being treated like, or as, business customers in a class setting? Fourth, should responsible student-customers be managed any differently than underperforming, unprepared, or free-riding student-customers?

By present standards in US higher education, underperforming students are subjected to academic intervention, probation, or dismissal only after two or more consecutive terms (e.g., quarters, semesters) of poor performance across multiple courses. Students can also evaluate their performance (e.g., grades for assignments, tests, team performance) and decide to withdraw from a course before a term ends. Alas, however, these actions address students’ performance only after much time has passed. Essentially, they fail to remedy myriad issues (e.g., free-riding, social loafing) that compromise the learning environment of individual courses during a single term. For instance, students who are unfocused and unprepared tend to contribute little substance to discussions that advance the shared learning of an entire class. Students who are irresponsible and tardy can undermine their peers early and often on a team project. In turn, a “sucker effect” could ensue, causing exceptional students to lose enthusiasm, become less engaged, and protect themselves from being exploited by free riders in a class (Kerr, 1983; McLaughlin & Fennick, 1987). In short, academic probation, dismissal, team-firing, and withdrawal cannot always address a faculty member’s time-sensitive need to safeguard the learning environment and the students most committed to it. How can a faculty member teaching a marketing strategy class provide the best education for students who actually desire it? How can the faculty member protect her/his students from known free-riders/social loafers? How can the faculty prevent a “sucker effect” and motivate good students not to work down towards the class mean but towards their best potential? How can the faculty member help energize or inspire mediocre students to work up towards or beyond the class mean?

In marketing practice, successful businesses evaluate current and potential customers based on carefully developed principles related to segmentation, targeting, and positioning. Evaluating customers and relationships with them is, indeed, an ongoing endeavor. Driven to generate sustainable advantages, businesses must create, deliver, and defend a solid value proposition that satisfies customer needs and organizational objectives. Consequently, in the real world, service providers examine the value of their customer relationships, and determine whether to

maintain or terminate those relationships. For example, personal fitness trainers may drop a client/customer who is habitually tardy or unwilling to devote sufficient effort during workouts. Hairstylists may stop providing services for a client/customer whose hair requires significant effort and time, yet generates unjustifiably little profit. Sports venue staff may remove fans that disturb or disrupt others fans. Indeed, service providers aim to serve a strong portfolio of customers/clients that duly respect their expertise, effort, time, other customers/clients and so forth. Additionally, various service providers *cooperate* and *partner* with their customers/clients in the service process: better physical strength and endurance (fitness trainer); healthy and attractive hair (hair stylist); effective decision making (personal coaches); and so on. For better or worse, discussions of customer-oriented business metaphors for explaining higher education seldom incorporate this reality into the picture. These metaphors overlook an undesirable but sometime necessary best practice of dropping customers who act irresponsibly in the service relationship, are too costly to serve, bad for the brand, and so forth. In many cases, customers seldom have unconditional powers to determine the mutual rules of engagement for their relationships with businesses. For example, banks alone have the power, right, and freedom to close customer accounts, change interest rates on credit card interest rates, and so forth, regardless of whether customers find fault with such practices.

As proposed in this article, such an application could essentially drive students to take more direct responsibility for their success and enable faculty to develop higher quality learning environments. It would encourage students to contemplate whether applying marketing concepts (e.g., customer orientation) to higher education should be limited to fancy brochures, interactive websites, and entertaining campus tours. By shaking up classrooms with some actual marketing practices, both students and faculty could be empowered to evaluate, engage, and reject one another in ways that help educational institutions produce better deliverables: better students for instructors, better students for fellow students, better instructors for students, and so on.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

120 undergraduate marketing majors (87.1%) and minors participated in this study. The students were enrolled in upper-level marketing courses (e.g., marketing strategy) at private AACSB-accredited business school in the northeastern United States. Seniors represented 85% of the sample, which was 66.7% female and averaged 21.27 years of age. As a departure from typical studies on the topic, this particular study was focused exclusively on how students (not faculty, staff, or administrators) perceive themselves as stakeholders who directly share in consuming and contributing to their educational

experience. In that regard, this study is informed by McCollough and Gremler's (1999) service guarantee study, where they obtained opinions from eight to nine student-customers in focus groups. In this present study, upper-level marketing majors and minors were selected for their years of student experience and familiarity with the customer concept, which were important requirements for meaningful participation in this study.

Measurement

Survey 1: Perceptions of Customers

The author asked students to complete a survey that was presented in two stages. For sake of simplicity, results (i.e., descriptive statistics, written comments) are shown within the description for each stage of the survey. First, students responded to the inquiry: Are students customers? Why or why not? In response, nearly all students declared "Yes" and/or affirmed so by raising their hands. They provided rationale for their responses in written statements, which are shown representatively in Table 2.

Following four questions about their gender, age, classification, and academic program, students answered several questions about the perception and treatment of customers within academic (see Table 3a). Based on a 5-point scale (e.g., strongly disagree, strongly agree) students expressed strong agreement that students are customers (Q5: 4.59). Students generally want to be treated as customers by faculty, staff, and administrators (Q6: 3.66) and would view their school favorably as a result (Q7: 3.63). Overall, they believe that their school has a strong academic reputation (Q8: 4.13) and would like it to have a stronger reputation in the future (Q9: 4.54).

Next, students answered several questions about their perception and treatment of customers in business settings, the source of the customer concept (see Table 3b). Based on their responses, students believe that some customers are more important than others (Q10: 4.23) and that some customers more desirable to retain than others (Q11: 4.59). They agree modestly that "certain customers should be dropped if serving them becomes too costly or unprofitable" (Q12: 3.75).

MDA: Presentation, Discussion, and Reaction

Following the first set of survey items, students were asked to review a document entitled "The Mutual Drop/Add Idea" (see Table 1). The document featured a short preamble, intended goals, possible outcomes, basic concept, and design. After reading the description, a lengthy discussion occurred where students asked questions to get clarification on possible motives and hypothetical implementations of the idea. Students understood, for example, that the number of students retained in/dropped from a given class was for illustrative purposes, and could be zero (0), if merited by student performance. It was also understood that an application of this idea could not consider nonperformance factors, such as a student's

family influence, charitable giving, race, gender, religion, attractiveness, friendliness, and contrary opinions. The discussion was concluded when all

students indicated that they clearly comprehended the fundamental idea of mutual drop/add. We then asked students to evaluate, react to, and build upon the idea.

Table 2: Sample Comments about Students as Customers

1. "We *shop* for colleges by choosing the best fit for us."
2. "Certain schools compete against one another by giving scholarships and such to persuade students to choose them."
3. "The school's resources, professors, and facilities are products that we, the students, purchase use of after surveying the competition."
4. "The tuition we pay is what keeps the schools running."
5. "The benefit in paying for this service is that education improves life by opening doors to different career paths for the consumer (student) to choose from."
6. "We have expectations of the university and if they are not met we may become unsatisfied and have the option of moving on to another school."
7. "We listen to word of mouth reviews."
8. "We look at schools as a package/brand."
9. "Once students have invested their time and money into the institution, they must constantly be convinced to remain loyal to the school..."
10. "Students of a university are customers of that university. They pay tuition and in return they receive an education. They are paying for a service."
11. "Many students are customers of education. Some college students are responsible for paying their own college tuition and they are both customers and consumers of their education."
12. "Students have the ability to pick their respective major and course as they want, like a customer who walks into a store and decides what he/she wants for dinner."
13. "Once a student enrolls/pay tuition, it's up to them how they utilize their product. You could slack off or study intensely."
14. "We have the right to be selective, weigh our options. Schools are competing for our business."
15. "Schools will tailor their offerings to students, similar to businesses tailoring their products to the public's wants/needs."

Table 3a: Perceptions Regarding Students as Customers (n=120)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std Dev
Q5	Students are customers.	4.59	.63
Q6	As a student, I want to be treated as a customer by faculty, staff, and administrators.	3.66	.98
Q7	I would view this school favorably if I were treated as a customer.	3.63	1.02
Q8	This school has a strong academic reputation.	4.13	.65
Q9	I want this school to have a stronger academic reputation in the future.	4.54	.74

All statements evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 =strongly agree).

Table 3b: Perceptions Regarding Customers in the Business World (n=120)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std Dev
	In the business world, ...		
Q10	some customers are more important than others.	4.23	.94
Q11	some customers are more desirable to retain.	4.59	.60
Q12	certain customers should be dropped if serving them becomes too costly or unprofitable.	3.75	.96

All statements evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 =strongly agree).

Survey 2: Student Reactions to MDA

The next stage in this study was to examine how students would evaluate and respond to *MDA*, one that could affect how they (and their peers) engage and perform within the educational environment. Immediately after the discussion, students were asked to evaluate the idea by responding to several items (Q13-26) on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Students report mixed feelings about whether an *MDA* program would “make me feel uncomfortable as a student” (Q13: 3.12) or “intimidate me from participating in class” (Q14: 2.33). However, scores for several items indicate that students generally associate rather favorable outcomes from *MDA*. For example, students report that possible outcomes of an *MDA* program would likely “prepare me for the competitive job market” (Q15: 4.16), “improve the academic reputation of this school” (Q16: 3.88), “help filter or ‘weed out’ unmotivated students” (Q17: 4.06), “lead me to use faculty office hours more often” (Q19: 3.92), “compel me to be prepared for classes more often” (Q20: 4.22), “create a more academically respected school” (3.91),

“motivate me to participate more during class” (Q24: 4.02), and “make employers place more value on the quality of a degree from my school” (Q26: 4.03). In terms of potential impact on enrollment, students disagree that an *MDA* program would “drive me to find an alternative school to attend” (2.68).

When asked to indicate whether *MDA* would be a good idea for colleges and universities to consider, students seem to believe so (Q27: 3.28). The students indicated to a lesser degree that *MDA* would not be a good idea for colleges/universities to consider (Q28: 2.74). While not a standalone metric, these two items provide an added summary evaluation of *MDA*. Comparing the two responses, the data suggest more support than opposition ($t=3.182$, $p < .002$). All items, except Q13 and Q18, differed significantly from neutral (3.00). Table 4 provides a breakdown of related survey items. Table 5 shows a sample of written reactions from students about *MDA*. In light of the intermingled considerations articulated within and across these reactions, they are presented all together, rather than categorized as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral.

Table 4: Student Evaluations of MDA (n=120)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std Dev
	The mutual drop/add concept would ...		
Q13	make me feel uncomfortable as a student.	3.12	.94
Q14	intimidate me from participating in class.	2.33	.87
Q15	prepare me for the competitive job market.	4.16	.69
Q16	improve the academic reputation of this school.	3.88	.94
Q17	help filter or “weed out” unmotivated students.	4.06	.75
Q18	be a turn-off for me.	3.03	1.00
Q19	lead me to use faculty office hours more often.	3.92	.76
Q20	compel me to be prepared for classes more often.	4.22	.64
Q21	make me value my classes more than I do now.	3.58	.90
Q22	create a more academically respected school.	3.91	.90
Q23	increase my appreciation of the college experience.	3.24	.97
Q24	motivate me to participate more often during class.	4.02	.79
Q25	drive me to find an alternative school to attend.	2.68	.93
Q26	make employers place more value on the quality of a degree from my school.	4.03	.74
	Overall, the mutual drop/add concept would ...		
Q27	be a good idea for colleges/universities to consider.	3.28	.95
Q28	not be a good idea for colleges/universities to consider.	2.74	.97

All statements evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 =strongly agree).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Let’s try to find a more appropriate model for education than yet another half-baked idea borrowed from the retail world. Or else let’s candidly admit what we are edging toward or are perhaps already doing when we adopt the ‘student-as-customer’ model wholeheartedly. Remember, ‘the customer is always right.’

— Brian Gordon, Professor
St. Louis Community College

Many people have come to view student as customers (Bowden, 2011; Lewison & Hayes, 2007; Litten, 1980; Obermiller et al., 2005; Scott, 1999; Sharrock, 2000). The findings of this study suggest that this view still prevails among students. Yet, as indicated in this study, they have mixed opinions about how broadly the student-as-customer paradigm should be related to their role, performance, and evaluation in the classroom environment. Students may be enthusiastic about a retail-oriented, customer-centric model that favors their ability to shop around and get what they want (e.g., professors, courses, weekly

schedules, effort level); however, they may be less enthusiastic about being dropped by service providers (i.e., faculty) whose transparent metrics might merit them unfit or undesirable to continue serving. Indeed, many customers have one-sided notions (i.e., the customer is always right, the customer deserves to get what s/he pays for) which are not necessarily accepted by service providers in all business sectors (Adams, 2009).

Existing research has shown that some people view students as customers, as products, or as neither (see Bowden, 2011; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Franz, 1998; Muncy, 2008; Obermiller et al., 2005). In turn, educational institutions and faculty possibly should (not) be regarded as producers and/or service providers (Svensson & Wood, 2007). The present study blends these views in favor of a portmanteau, asserting that students (and faculty) are actually

producers *and* consumers, or *prosumers*, in their educational experience. That is, students actually get an education that reflects, in part, how effectively they have consumed *and* contributed to the overall learning that is represented symbolically by the academic credential (e.g., diploma) awarded by their college or university. As more people join the conversation about the constellations of terms now situated within the “business metaphorscape,” one can expect more debate about whether students are customers, or products for that matter. The notion of the *student as prosumer* could be useful as a paradigm for future pedagogy, scholarship, and debate. Indeed, it is rather consistent with the belief that “As with any service, in education, the customer’s participation is crucial. Better learning occurs when students are actively involved in the process of acquiring new knowledge” (Obermiller et al., 2005, p. 27).

Table 5: Sample of Student Comments Regarding MDA

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1. “I think it’s a good idea since it’s pleasant to be around motivated students. I think it would also help the effectiveness of group projects. Many times you end up doing most of the work. If all students were highly motivated this could be avoided.”
 2. “Interesting concept. Reminds me of the farm system in baseball or the relegation system in British soccer.”
 3. “I feel that the add/drop period would intimidate many students from applying to the school, but the ones that do and get in will be working hard. The add/drop period would make the school more academically respected because of the hard-working students it has.”
 4. “I like the idea very much, personally. I wish this would have been implemented when I first went to college because I was unmotivated and unappreciative that my parents were sending me to school on their dime.”
 5. “I believe this program would not only make the student the customer but the school a customer as well as they’d then have a choice as to who would be using their services and therefore increase their brand’s reputation.”
 6. “I would not like the added tension between students and teachers. I do believe it would force some students to be more motivated overall academically.”
 7. “I enjoy the concept because I am naturally a competitive person. However, I can get into slumps where I skip class and don’t study as much because I am coasting on a B or think I can make up for it later.”
 8. “The mutual drop/add concept would most likely inspire more participation and harder work from students early in the semester when many of them are not taking class seriously yet. It would be a good way of introducing completion for the most part.”
 9. “College is already hard enough with a lot of pressure. We got the high school grades to get accepted. No one should be able to drop us from a class because we’re paying money.”
 10. “I think in a perfect world it sounds appealing. I see the difficulties transitioning to it, but believe it would absolutely motivate student to increase performance. I certainly would be interested, especially to see if it would work.”
 11. “I think it is a good idea but intimidating for students without a strong sense of competition. I believe that it could lead to those students withdrawing from the university.”
 12. “I feel that it would just be additional aspect of competition in our lives. Competition is something that we all group around and basically determines who we become by how we perform or react. It would cause motivated students to excel even farther than previously.”
 13. “I do not think it is a good idea. You get accepted into a college/university for a reason. Some people learn/interact in class differently. People who are shy get off to a slow start and should not be penalized.”
 14. “It could help increase participation and learning in classes but may deter students from your school.”
 15. “The only issue I have with the add/drop program is the increased cost of tuition the five students would need to pay if they did not make the cut. The perception of a student who remains too long in school is poor. Perhaps, this is the motivation they need.”
 16. “I think this process would have to be implemented delicately. We discussed promoting healthy competition, not nasty competition. I think it would have to be made very clear what kind is expected.”
 17. “I think it is a good idea because it can only motivate and help you gain confidence for college experience in class and even in the real world.”
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Table 5: Sample of Student Comments Regarding MDA (continued)

18. "The mutual drop/add concept would make me feel very uncomfortable at first because I would be concerned that even doing my best in a class may be below par with other students in the class. However, I think after a while I would get used to the pressure and even be grateful for the extra pressure."
19. "I think it's a good idea since it's pleasant to be around motivated students. I think it would also help the effectiveness of group projects. Many times you end up doing most of the work. If all students were highly motivated this could be avoided."
20. "Interesting concept. Reminds me of the farm system in baseball or the relegation system in British soccer."
21. "I feel that the add/drop period would intimidate many students from applying to the school, but the ones that do and get in will be working hard. The add/drop period would make the school more academically respected because of the hard-working students it has."
22. "I think this program would be a good idea – mostly because it would attract better caliber students to the school to begin with. The student body overall would improve as a result of this program because only students prepared for this model and comfortable with it would apply."
23. "I think the mutual drop/add period can be a good idea for certain classes, like maybe your major. I don't think it will be a good idea for general education requirements."
24. "I think this may work better if only applied to the business school, and not the university as a whole. I think standards, scheduling, and procedures need to be clear and easy to make this successful."
25. "I think this should definitely be implemented. I admit to putting in less effort when I don't feel it's "worth it" or I feel my time/effort would be more appreciated/valued in other ways. I would not mind putting in more effort if everyone did the same. [Course title removed] is an example of a class where people work to their full potential of get "fired" from the group."
26. "I think the mutual drop/add concept would drive students away from the school and result in lower enrollment. I also believe it would increase the school's reputation and weed out unmotivated students."
27. "Without competition many students are content with just being "mediocre" and doing enough just to get by. This program would weed out the people who are not willing to work hard to get where they want to go. Although this program may not be for everyone, I think it would be a good idea to consider."
28. "Iron sharpens iron: competition would force everyone to hone their skills more and work harder if only to be one of the chosen students. Students that take 2 years of classes only to fail out would be more urgently pushed to work hard and the quality of each student would rise."
29. "I know that this idea sounds good on paper and it definitely would make people in general respect you as students after graduation from such a rigorous program. But at the same time it's kind of harsh. Some people are bad at academics and want to do well but struggle. With this program they don't get a chance."
30. "Teacher's job is to get the best out of students. They need to adapt to what they have and find a way to make students think and work in a way that is going to help the rest of the class."
31. "At first, I was all for it, but after listening to what others said, I'm on the fence. I see myself as a customer of the university, not the professor."
32. "It could help increase participation and learning in classes but may deter students from your school."
33. "I like the idea of the mutual drop/add concept because it would generate more competition. I do think that the criteria for the drop would need to be explicit so students would know what to expect."

Concerning the potential outcomes of an *MDA* implementation, the findings of this study indicate that students generally would desire and anticipate an improvement in their school's academic reputation and future job prospects. Of course, if *credibly* implemented in any form, this approach to performance evaluation would have to be fair, just, and transparent (Houston & Bettencourt, 1999). In fact, one student noted the following in a written comment:

I think this concept is an idea that should be developed further. The mutual drop/add concept would drive most students into doing the best they possibly can in all of their classes. There needs to be a metric developed so the drop/add requirement are the same throughout all classes.

In the quest to improve (avert) advancement (decline) in student engagement, instructors typically

have considered a narrow range of tactics, including incentives (e.g., extra credit), rewards (e.g., field trips), and punishments (e.g., grade point deductions). Yet, the evidence provided by student feedback on *MDA* suggests that (a) it could be a good idea to implement and (b) it would encourage better performance-related habits for each student and her/his peers. Indeed, *mutual drop/add* seems to be a reasonable proposition to interject when debating the appropriateness of customer metaphors for business schools. Even in its imperfect form, the idea infuses basic real-world principles of market competition and performance evaluation that students will inevitably encounter as future business professionals, especially as team members. As shown, many students would prefer an educational setting that drives them (and their peers) to bring out their very best. Business and marketing metaphors are not likely to exit conversations about higher education any time soon. However, broader

conversations on the matter can be helpful. The discussion and reaction following the presentation of *MDA* suggest that, at the very least, we need to ask students (customers) what would create more value for them. This would seem especially true in today's era of schools competing fiercely to attract and retain highly motivated students who want and pay (i.e., with proper effort) for the best possible learning experience. As shown in this study, some students may be demotivated by their less involved or underperforming peers, leading them to work closer to the mean rather than toward their fullest potential. In fact, Lewis and Hawes (2007) assert that in the "educational consumer market" students can be distinguished, or segmented, from one another based on their motivations and benefits sought for attending a college or university. At its core, *MDA* directly addresses the motivations part of this segmentation approach. Thus, for example, it could be particularly well suited for helping to identify career-oriented learners and filter "ambivalent learners" (Lewis and Hawes, 2007) — students often motivated to seek educational services to avoid other life experiences or satisfy someone else (e.g., parents).

Colleges and universities are keenly interested in attracting and retaining quality students. Likewise, quality students enroll at these academic institutions with intentions to enhance their basic learning, career prospects, life options, and so forth. Regardless of whether students are viewed as customers, or just students, they deserve a quality educational experience. Essentially, *MDA* reflects an attempt to provide a high quality education for those students that want it, are prepared to earn, and appreciate the ensuing social benefits it affords.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This present research is not without limitations. The study is rather exploratory in nature, and the actual legality, enrollment impact, or financial ramifications of *MDA* — important factors in discourse on higher education -- were not, but should be, considered. Also,

the study could be enhanced with a larger sample size and, perhaps, a more diverse array of students in terms of majors/fields of study (e.g., philosophy, languages, finance, chemistry). Additionally, the range of survey questions is highly specific, limited to the perceptions of students as customers and evaluations of *MDA*. Presentation of the idea was successful in stimulating students to share objective and subjective critiques of typical classroom experiences, areas for improvement, and *MDA*. Nevertheless, while the findings are informative and interesting, readers should be cautious in generalizing them.

Looking forward, future research should try to ascertain whether and how much students really view themselves as customers, products, or some other *thing*. Additionally, this study provides administrators, educators, and scholars some rationale for considering customer paradigms that require students to take responsible ownership of their education (learning and creating) earlier and more often. In that light, education leaders must be mindful of the metaphors and their sources tapped selectively for wisdom in steering academic paradigms. Many service professionals (e.g., fitness trainers, venue managers, physicians, banks, lawyers, therapists, hair stylists) drop certain customers who are problematic or unprofitable. As faculty, colleges, and universities aim to maintain or improve their reputations, they must uphold standards of quality in all interactions with student-customers.

This article has shown that students believe an *MDA-like* concept could drive important outcomes, such as better personal performance, weeding out unmotivated peers, and improving long-term reputation of an academic degree/institution. Thus, future research should consider a range of deliverables — beyond curricular content — that students actually demand as customers. The literature also could benefit by triangulating perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators to determine what students are (not). Further, such research should examine, qualitatively and quantitatively, these perspectives across different countries settings, cultural contexts, academic disciplines, and educational institutions.

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