

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 317

JC 030 512

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TITLE Applying Customer Satisfaction Theory to Community College Planning of Counseling Services.
PUB DATE 2002-09-00
NOTE 15p.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://www.ijournal.us>.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT iJournal; n2 Sep 2002
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Colleges; Counseling; *Counseling Services; Guidance Programs; *Satisfaction; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; *Student Personnel Services; Student Welfare; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS Student Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

This article discusses a framework in which a researcher may apply a customer satisfaction model to the planning of counseling services at the community college level. It also reviews some historical work on satisfaction research with the unique environment of student services in two-year colleges. The article suggests that readers could benefit from this paper by understanding a constructive way to use data on student satisfaction and by gaining potential justification for conducting such work. Furthermore, it discusses three major points concerning the application of customer satisfaction theory to community college planning of counseling services, including: (1) defining student satisfaction; (2) adapting the customer satisfaction model for student services; and (3) policy implications for using the customer satisfaction model in student services at community colleges. The article also emphasizes that college administrators should use the student satisfaction research as an improvement tool, not as a staff evaluation tool. It describes the limitations of student satisfaction research as being able to only measure some of the factors that contribute to a student's satisfaction because the school cannot control all factors related to student satisfaction. Finally, there is a discussion of some possible reasons for delaying or rejecting the implementation of the customer satisfaction model in student service and counseling research. (Contains 6 figures and 16 references.) (JS)

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***Applying Customer Satisfaction Theory
to Community College Planning of
Counseling Services***

Willard C. Hom

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Applying Customer Satisfaction Theory to Community College Planning of Counseling Services

by
Willard C.Hom

Abstract: This paper discusses a framework in which a researcher may apply a customer satisfaction model to the planning of counseling services at the community college level. The paper will integrate some historical work on satisfaction research with the unique environment of student services in two-year colleges. The reader should benefit by seeing a constructive way to use data on student satisfaction and by gaining potential justification for sponsoring such work.

I. Introduction.

This paper discusses three major points concerning the application of customer satisfaction theory (CST) to community college planning of one element of student services, counseling. In brief, the three points are (1) definition of customer satisfaction; (2) adapting the basic definition of customer satisfaction; and (3) policy relevance of customer satisfaction. We use the phrase customer satisfaction theory for the sake of convenience although many people will argue that students are not always (or not even usually) customers in the traditional sense as exemplified by people who purchase goods and services in the retail sector. For a scholarly discussion on this topic of customers and public sector service, the reader should consult the recent article by Alford (Alford, 2002).

The use of CST has occurred in a number of professional services such as healthcare and in a wide variety of operations for both government and nonprofit organizations. Academic researchers in marketing have analyzed this theory in the setting of postsecondary education (Taylor, 1996). Institutional researchers and college administrators have used student satisfaction surveys (such as the Noel-Levitz instrument, et al) for a variety of institutional services (Graham & Gisi, 2000; and Lampley, 2001) but hardly without debate (Olshavsky & Spreng, 1995). Finally, major studies of policy in higher education have used student satisfaction to help draw their conclusions (Bowen & Bok, 1998; and Knox, Lindsay, & Kolb, 1993).

Despite this history of customer satisfaction as a part of program and process analysis, many people in the two-year college environment have little exposure to CST. The lack of exposure can lead to serious misunderstandings about student satisfaction in terms of its measurement, its analysis, and its use in policy planning.

II. Defining Student Satisfaction

In analyzing student satisfaction, using CST, the academic researcher (or planner) in student services would first need to define student satisfaction. This is no small task because we lack a standard definition of student satisfaction. Researchers in the field of CST have developed competing definitions for customer satisfaction, and the academic researcher/planner will need to select and modify a definition before proceeding any further in the analysis of student satisfaction.

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Some typical definitions appear as follows:

Satisfaction is the state felt by a person who has experienced a performance (or outcome) that has fulfilled his or her expectations. Satisfaction is thus a function of relative levels of expectation and perceived performance...Expectations are formed on the basis of past experiences with the same or similar situations, statements made by friends and other associates, and statements made by the supplying organization. (Kotler & Clarke, 1987).

Satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment. (Oliver, 1997).

Satisfaction or dissatisfaction is more than a reaction to the actual performance quality of a product or service. It is influenced by prior expectations regarding the level of quality. According to the expectancy disconfirmation model, consumers often form beliefs about product performance based upon prior experience with the product and/or upon communications about the product that imply a certain level of quality. When something performs the way we thought it would, we may not think much about it. If, on the other hand, something fails to live up to expectations, a negative affect may result. And, if performance happens to exceed our expectations, we are satisfied and pleased. (Solomon, 1996)

The historical and current definitions of customer satisfaction center on the concepts of expectations, experience, perceived service, and a resulting evaluation. Figure 1 displays this central relationship in CST.

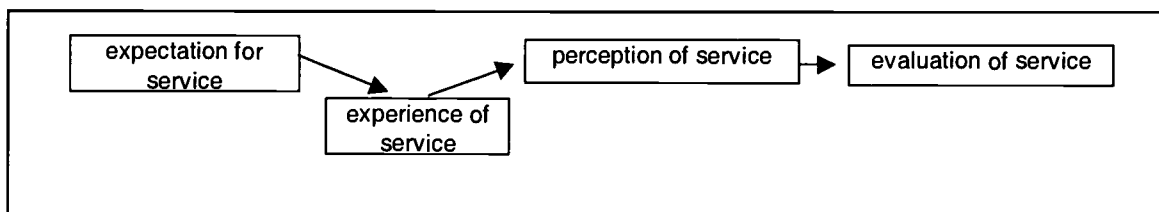


Figure 1: Basic Model for Customer (Dis)Satisfaction

Note that CST only requires the use or experience of a product or service; it does not require the purchase of a product or service. For this reason, many theorists prefer the terminology of *consumer satisfaction* rather than *customer satisfaction* to avoid the debate about the need for direct payment by a user to a provider before one can apply CST to the situation. In this paper, we take the position that CST will apply on the basis of use (consumption) and not upon purchase. This is true for three reasons. Students often use student services such as counseling without making direct payments for these

services (and third parties, like parents/guardians, may often fund these costs when they do occur). Secondly, satisfaction in the student services environment will focus much less upon the concept of value than it would in a retail environment. Thirdly, even when students do personally pay for their student fees and tuition, the counseling services they may receive are usually “bundled” with the total instructional package funded by the fees and tuition (as well as taxpayer subsidies), making them indistinguishable in terms of cost. So, to a large degree, this limitation in the relevance of the value concept will avoid the debate over the definition and measurement of value (Oliver, 1999).

We should recognize that researchers/planners will want to envision CST as a possible process with durable status. Figure 1 presents CST as a snapshot of sorts; it indicates the immediate state of student satisfaction that would follow experience with a student service. We may conceptualize student satisfaction as an ongoing attitude whereby the student occasionally re-evaluates his/her level of satisfaction on the basis of new experiences or new data. Figure 2 below presents this longer view. To some extent, an individual’s maturation process and the fading of the salience of a specific service experience over time will also alter the durable level of student satisfaction for a student service. Change in student satisfaction may occur over time even if the student has no new service experience or data on the subject.

Figure 2 also gives additional detail to the perception of service, the phase that occurs after experience of a service but before evaluation of a service in Figure 1. Figure 2 uses a phase for *awareness* to represent the sensing that service has occurred. Figure 2 then uses a separate phase for *attribution* to represent his/her recognition for the amount of credit that the provider (in comparison to the student’s own efforts or resources) should receive for the perceived level of service outcome.

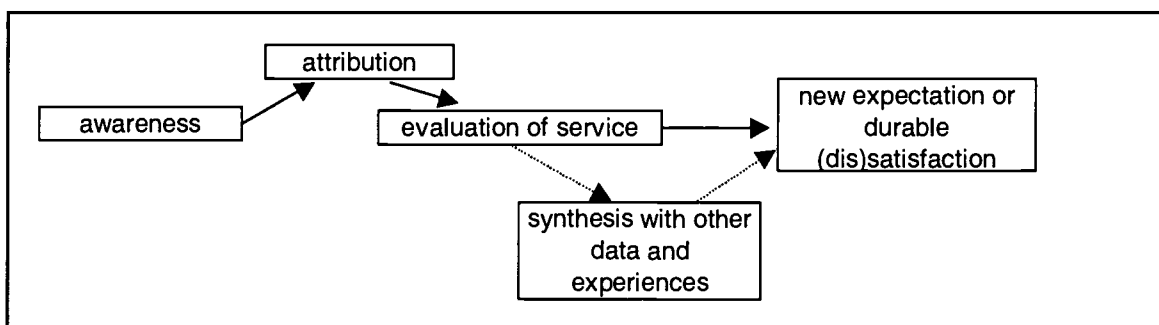


Figure 2: Factors in Durable (Dis)Satisfaction

To conclude our discussion of the definition of student satisfaction, we should also note two more points. First, satisfaction may be defined as an overall attitude or as a set of attitude components. A student can have a level of overall satisfaction with a student service. At the same time that student can have a level of satisfaction for each part of the experience. To a great extent, a student will formulate an overall satisfaction level with a service on the basis of his/her satisfaction with the components of a service. However,

the degree to which a student can accurately evaluate components of a service will depend upon his/her ability to discriminate between the components of a service experience and upon the potential for the so-called *halo effect*. The ability to discriminate between components will, in turn, depend upon how transparent or seamless the service provider makes a process and upon how much awareness (perceptiveness) the student has during the experience. The influence of halo effect will depend upon how much salience, importance, or affect that a student will attach to one component in comparison to other components of a service. To the extent that one component will dominate the student's evaluative process, the student may distort his/her evaluation of the remaining components. We display this point in Figure 3 below.

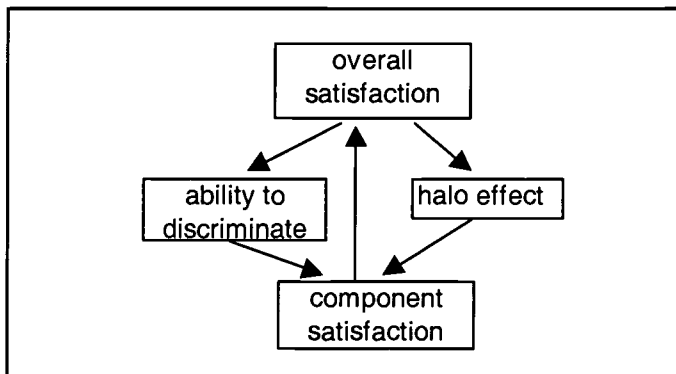


Figure 3: Linkage of Overall and Component Satisfaction

The second point in this closing section is the composition of the aforementioned components to satisfaction. We can conceptualize components as two different types of factors. We summarize this point in Figure 4 below. There is an objective type of factor that identifies the physical features or parts of a service experience. Some researchers might label these as the service bundle. Such features would include things like the arrangement of the appointment process; the waiting time just before the appointment; the privacy of the experience; the amount of time provided; and follow-up communications. To a great extent, these are factors of a process that occur or do not occur as planned by the service provider. On the other hand, the evaluative type of factor is part of a universal set of factors that people use to evaluate service quality. Such factors may be categorized as tangibles; reliability; responsiveness; assurance; and empathy (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). New research into evaluative factors for service quality tends to make the above list of five factors prone to change of course.

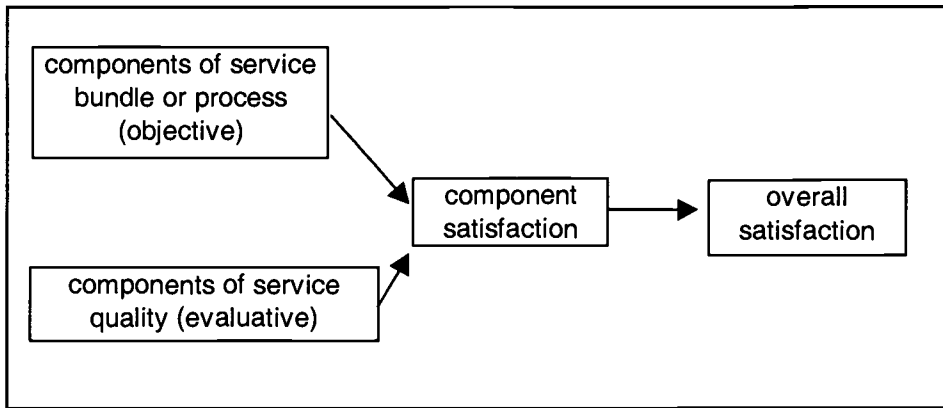


Figure 4: Inputs to Component Satisfaction

III. Adapting the Definition for Student Services

Some people may want to know how a customer satisfaction model that business uses differs from a general student satisfaction model that a public two-year college would use for its instruction. The major differences that would affect our modeling appear as follows:

1. Students usually have difficulty assessing the value (in the economic sense) of the educational product in that the price of the service is usually not apparent to them for two reasons. In general, students either do not directly pay for the services (although working students will tend to be different here) and/or because there is no competitive market that lists prices for the bundle of services that are truly equivalent to those at the community college. (We assume here that the community college “bundle” differs from the private sector “bundle” in terms of features like student events and campus amenities.)
2. Students may regard public education as a form of entitlement rather than as a good or service for which an economic exchange must occur in order to receive the service (or benefits).
3. To a great extent, students do not have as much choice in the provision of public education, in comparison to most goods and services rendered by the private sector.
4. To a great extent, students lack access to third-party ratings of public education services; they do not have a *Consumers Report* for community colleges. (Thus, the framing of service expectations differs.)
5. Unlike most consumer goods and services, a large portion of the burden for success in public education lies with the service recipient rather than the service provider (that is, success depends largely on the consumer’s own effort). Success in the public education service fits a joint production process more similar to situations found in health care than situations commonly found in the retail goods/services sector.

6. Co-recipients of the service (public education)---the classmates--- affect the individual's own level of benefit during the service experience (through crowding or lack of personal attention from the instructor). Some group service environments like theaters and restaurants also share this unique property, but the prolonged nature of a semester course tends to magnify this factor for the student.

The above differences highlight the need to emphasize equity, intangible factors, and access as critical factors in a student satisfaction model at a community college. Simultaneously, the differences indicate the lack of emphasis that such a model should place on the concept of value, a critical element in private sector satisfaction models.

Naturally, before we would apply a student satisfaction model to the somewhat unique context of counseling at the community colleges, we should determine how the nature of counseling affects our specific student satisfaction model for it, in contrast to the generic concept of student satisfaction in education. This in turn will affect the way we will measure student satisfaction for counseling. We may distinguish counseling satisfaction from other types of student satisfaction (especially satisfaction regarding classroom instruction) in the following ways:

1. Students will experience encounters with counselors (the assumed providers of this element of student services in this article) on a very sporadic schedule;
2. Counselors have little control in terms of follow-up for an initial encounter (unlike the scenario of the instructor in the classroom who has a schedule of encounters with students over a semester or quarter);
3. Students will use counseling for a wide array of needs or purposes;
4. Many (but certainly not all) students will use counseling services under stressful circumstances (because the student will often reach a state of crisis before seeking help);
5. To some extent, the use of counseling services may incur some stigma (unlike the taking of nonremedial courses);
6. In many instances, the use of counseling services has no systematic or formal sanction to motivate student use for them (unlike the formalized curriculum requirements that will drive student enrollment in specific classes);
7. In many cases, the power relationship between the student and the counselor differs substantially from the student/instructor power relationship (where the instructor's power to grade the student in the course gives him/her leverage that a counselor may not have).

8. Students and counselors must often interact very explicitly and candidly in order to achieve progress, meaning that the student must exercise critical self-disclosure of personal problems and beliefs—implying a critical need for trust; for cultural understanding; and for proactive probing by counselors;
9. Students have little means for immediately gauging many benefits of counseling services;
10. Students may benefit from counseling services in terms of psychological well-being (in contrast to cognitive development or learning achievement in the classroom setting);
11. The service will depend greatly upon the perceived features, such as empathy, of the in-person interaction between the student and the counselor;
12. The counselor will need to consider the student's needs on a holistic basis much more than an instructor would need to do when a student requests guidance (because instructors generally focus upon the context of their particular course and students generally approach them only for that context);
13. The counselor, unlike the classroom instructor, has little means to measure the efficacy of his/her service to a particular student;
14. The counselor, unlike the classroom instructor, works one-on-one in a dyadic format with the student (much like a doctor and patient), enabling the service provider to focus solely upon the individual needs of one student without simultaneously balancing the needs of his/her classmates; and
15. Like the student, the counselor has no immediate way to gauge the degree of benefit that he/she has provided to a student.

Some similarities between counseling services and classroom instruction are as follows:

1. The service is a “credence” good in that students must have faith that the provider is expert and professional in its (or his/her) delivery of the service;
2. The service inputs and outputs are intangible and difficult to measure;
3. The service involves customer participation in the production of the benefit;
4. Much of the service benefit accrues to the service recipient over a long period of time.

The main point of this section is that student satisfaction for counseling services will differ in many substantive ways from student satisfaction for classroom instruction. Because measurement of student satisfaction in higher education has largely focused on classroom instruction, current survey instruments and models will need modification before the researcher/planner can apply them effectively to the environment of counseling services. The changes will probably need to weigh situation-specific issues of survey content, survey procedure, data interpretation, and program planning.

This adaptation process will take serious analysis on the part of the researcher/planner because a particular counseling service at a particular college or district will tend to have very unique levels of similarity or dissimilarity to standard classroom situations. For this reason, we cannot give a more detailed elaboration of the adaptation process that the researcher/planner may use as a template for data collection and analysis.

IV. Policy Implications

Finally, we address the implications of student satisfaction and CST for policy in counseling services at the community colleges. To a large extent, this discussion will also apply to student services other than counseling. Although this paper covers policy implications after the steps of definition of student satisfaction, the researcher/planner will probably need to tackle this topic first in a real on-campus situation. He/she would want to understand the policy implications before proposing to analyze student satisfaction or beginning to implement a student satisfaction agenda/program. In some situations, understanding the policy implications will also prepare the researcher/planner to address the validity or applicability of an existing program for student satisfaction at another college to his/her own college. We have only presented the definition issues prior to policy implications in this paper so that the reader would have sufficient information to understand the policy implications.

As a foundation to policy issues, it helps to recognize the potential effects of student satisfaction. Figure 5 identifies three major effects. The student's satisfaction, based upon the evaluation of service, will potentially affect the student's own behavior. As much prior research has shown, attitude affects behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The student's evaluation of counseling (or other student services) will affect the student's behavior and decisions, hopefully in the intended manner. To a certain extent, the benefit of some student services is the affect of change in the mental state of the student, so changes in behavior and decisions are not the only intended benefits of a service.

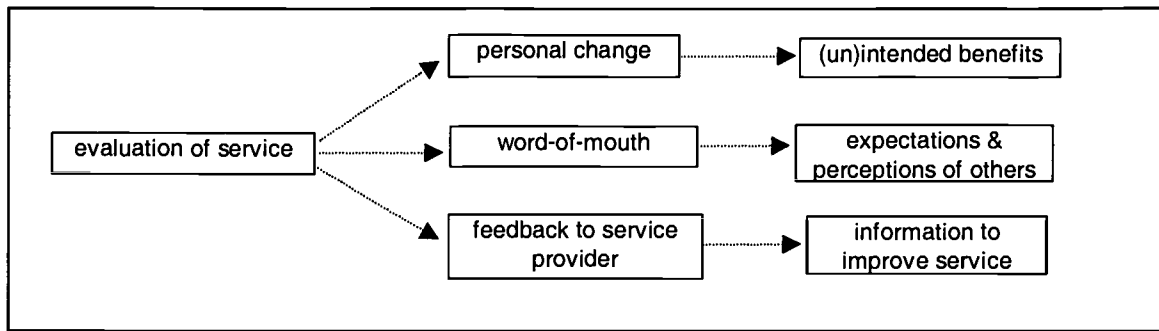


Figure 5: Potential Effects of Customer (Dis)Satisfaction

Student satisfaction will tend to generate word-of-mouth information about a service to other people. Although this post-experience activity may change the satisfaction of the service consumer (through cognitive dissonance), a very likely outcome is an effect upon the perceptions of service quality among recipients of the consumer's opinions. These may be other students who may become service users themselves (especially if the word-of-mouth reports are positive) or nonusers (especially if the reports are negative). As such, student satisfaction can affect future usage patterns for student services.

At a third level, student satisfaction can affect the delivery of the service by informing service providers of the efficacy of their work with the student. This, however, would primarily occur if the student directly feeds back his/her satisfaction for the service. Formal means of measuring this feedback may promote the use of such information at higher levels of the community college organization (such as deans and presidents) whereas informal feedback may largely be limited to use by the direct service provider such as the counselor.

The intended use of student satisfaction measurement in policy decisions will also determine a vital decision about the form of measurement. Ideally, the researcher/planner will use questions that measure both overall satisfaction and component satisfaction because the combination supports the three basic policy decisions that administrators regularly face. Figure 6 lays out the structure of this point.

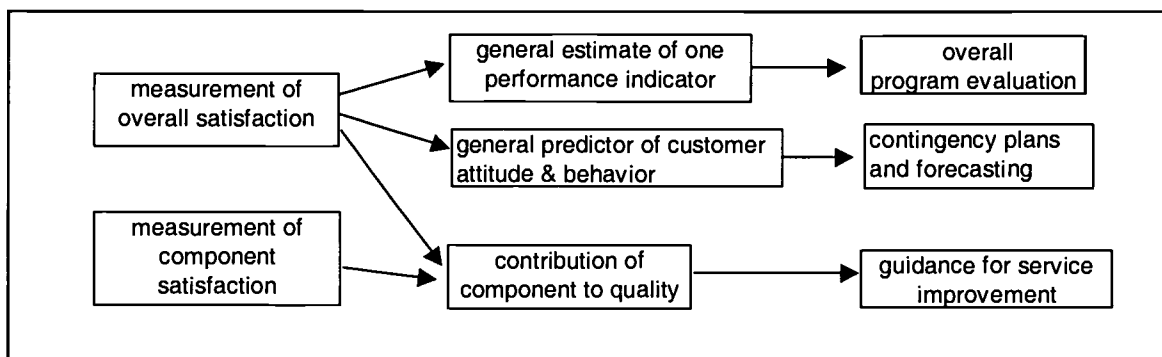


Figure 6: Linkage of Measurements to Administrative Action

By itself, measurement of overall satisfaction for a service will support (1) an overall evaluation of that service (or program) and (2) contingency plans and forecasts. In (2) the administrator may gain information to foresee user support or opposition for a program and to formulate budgets for future service usage. Along with a measure of overall satisfaction, the measurement of components enables the researcher/planner to estimate the statistical relationship (and hopefully the causal "contribution") of certain components to the overall satisfaction level. This estimation, in turn, can identify components of a service that need improvement or change. Without the component level of measurement, an administrator has only the option of accepting or rejecting a program/service in its entirety, depending upon his/her interpretation of a report of overall student satisfaction.

Some analysts may choose to skip an explicit survey measure for overall student satisfaction for a service. They may elect to aggregate the measures of component satisfaction to produce an estimate of overall student satisfaction. This practice has some risk in that the analyst must assume that the enumerated components in his/her survey really comprise the entire set of components underlying overall satisfaction. If this is not the case, the sum of the measured components will not equate with overall satisfaction, and the analyst will have both a distorted estimate of component's relationship to overall satisfaction and an incomplete measure of overall satisfaction.

The final point we will cover regarding policy implications regards the interplay of program (service) development and program (service) evaluation. In order to receive administrative support (in terms of authorization and requested budgeting) to begin or continue a program (service), administrators may often consider using highly optimistic portrayals of a program's efficacy. Administrators may often consider using highly optimistic portrayals of service to encourage student usage of a program (service). However, the consequence of unrealistically optimistic communications may be a reduction in student satisfaction. If student experiences are below the publicized performance for a program (service), then student satisfaction may be low for that service.

So administrators face a dilemma of reduced student satisfaction tied to the perceived need to provide a highly optimistic image for a new (or struggling) program (service). Kotler & Clarke succinctly state the issue.

The supplying organization influences satisfaction not only through its performance, but also through the expectations it creates. If it overclaims, it is likely to create subsequent dissatisfaction; and if it underclaims, it might attract fewer customers but create higher satisfaction. The safest course is to plan to deliver a certain level of performance and communicate this level to consumers. (Kotler & Clarke, 1987)

Note that the administrative risk of overclaiming can occur even without the use of a survey of student satisfaction. Among students, peer word-of-mouth acts as a powerful influence. If student satisfaction for a program (service) is low (partially because of

overclaiming), then future levels of use for a program (service) will probably plummet as negative word-of-mouth spreads. This will be especially true where the program (service) usage is purely voluntary by students.

Administrators may perceive a survey of student satisfaction as an additional risk in such circumstances. If administrators know that they may have overclaimed, then the survey may only expose them to criticism from external entities (and student groups as well). This is unfortunate in that administrators may avoid the use of such a survey and thereby lose a vital instrument for program (service) improvement and contingency planning/forecasting.

On the other hand, administrative levels that must oversee the operation or development of various programs (services) can use such surveys to great advantage. Not only can this level of administration realize the benefits as noted in Figure 6, but the requirement of a survey can limit the tendency for program (service) advocates to overclaim, and in the long run to see the true performance levels of a program (service) in comparison to claimed levels of performance. Where the program (service) has largely intangible benefits (such as counseling), satisfaction surveys, despite their limitations, are often the only feasible means for oversight agencies or top administrators to measure program (service) performance. Of course, this benefit will hinge upon the validity of the survey measurement that, in turn, hinges upon the impartiality (objectivity) and rigor (psychometric issues and construct validity issues) of a survey.

VI. Conclusion

This article has skirted around the many technical issues in measuring student satisfaction with CST. There has been a stream of studies on the technical points, and the researcher/planner who will actually write his/her own survey instrument should review some of these. For example, see the recent articles by Brady, Cronin & Brand (2002); Oshavsky & Kumar (2001); and Jun, et al (2001). This part of CST could easily require a full-length article by itself. We have left these technical points for other authors to cover so that the general points of this article are not obscured by the relevant debates that occur around the difficult choices in statistical analysis and psychometrics.

Aside from the technical issues of satisfaction surveys, some final words about administrative strategy are appropriate. The administrator should consider the student satisfaction survey as a process improvement tool, not a staff evaluation tool. The primary reason is that many factors that affect student satisfaction are beyond the control of counselors, especially the factor of expectations. For that matter, administrators should consider surveys of student satisfaction as only part of the data, albeit an important and irreplaceable part, that they should use to evaluate and plan their student services. Administrative records and personal observation are other critical sources of data for process improvement.

Administrators may have good reason to delay or reject implementation of a student satisfaction survey for student services. If the college has limited staff with the knowledge and skills to conduct the research in a rigorous manner, administrators may need to assign these scarce resources to surveys or other research with broader implications for the campus or district. If the organizational climate is extremely politicized with strongly divisive elements at work, then it would behoove the administrator to wait until a better campus climate evolves. A highly politicized environment makes it very hard for staff to conduct objective research, and study results that would normally motivate process improvement might go unheeded in such contentious situations. Finally, a satisfaction survey, like much institutional research, needs a long-term view for the administrator to make full use of the results. If administrators must overcome an onslaught of immediate crises in order to keep the campus running, then they will lack the patience to plan or use the satisfaction survey and its follow-up in an effective fashion.

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