

# A RELATIONSHIP MARKETING APPROACH TO ACADEMIC INITIATIVE PLANNING: A CASE IN POINT

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## ABSTRACT

*Many higher education initiatives are dependent upon the development of multiple relationships across academic and support functions. The probability of achieving superior initiative outcomes rests, in part, on the construction of an infrastructure that supports the goals, strategies, tactics, and ongoing mission of a defined project. Through adopting a relationship marketing perspective, the authors describe the process of analyzing and developing the underlying permanent infrastructure needed for implementing an ongoing effort for a new student support program. For illustrative purposes, a hypothetical case called the Student Reference Letter Project is developed as an academic initiative that traverses various departments and service functions with a focus on building enduring relationships.*

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations will transform over time to accommodate new programs and initiatives. While many variables can influence the adoption of change, Haviland, Shin, & Turley (2010) state that the adoption of innovations, in part, “is a social process through which we engage with others to explore, interpret and accept change.” The strategic development and construction of supporting infrastructures are fundamental to the success of innovative projects and require appropriate stakeholder involvement. For the purposes of this paper, an organizational blueprint will be suggested for developing an infrastructure that will support a sustained effort in developing a specific response to legitimate student/faculty concerns about educational support services for students. The intent of organizational development of new student-support initiatives is to coordinate and integrate the efforts of stakeholders across identified entities for the purposes of maximizing the initiative’s effectiveness over time. Many efforts fail or fall short of expectations because organizational responsibilities and

resources are not well-defined, and in some cases, there may be limited or no supporting infrastructure to sustain ongoing efforts that span across programs.

A hypothetical case of the Student Reference Letter Project is integrated throughout the paper to illustrate the process of identifying and building an organizational framework that will support and sustain a permanent endeavor. This case underscores the foundational necessity of a defined infrastructure-building process through the illustration of the organizational development and coordination demands of new initiatives in academic planning. The goal of the program encompasses students’ needs for reference letters during their academic tenure, upon graduation, and beyond. For the purposes of this case, an objective of the reference letter writing initiative will also be defined as a subset of numerous types of student-focused activities that fall into a broader design of student support services. The authors will highlight the potential opportunities of this specific initiative as it relates to overall reputation management of the institution.

## THE UNDERLYING STUDENT/FACULTY PROBLEM

Students are oftentimes unaware of the importance of getting to know faculty members when they are admitted into academic programs. Although there are numerous reasons students should get to know their professors, this paper focuses on students' eventual need for reference letters. In the event that students do not establish earlier professional relationships with their professors, it is probable that they will be reticent in requesting reference letters at a later time. In addition, faculty members may not know a particular student well enough to offer a meaningful letter of recommendation when requested. Consequently, these circumstances could reduce the likelihood that students will receive the quality letters that they need. The authors define this lack of connectedness as an institutional opportunity that should be addressed at an organizational level lest it have negative implications for both students and the organization. This organizational deficiency will be used as a rationale to initiate the hypothetical case, the Student Reference Letter Project, and the setting will be limited to business schools for brevity purposes.

## RETHINKING REFERENCE LETTERS

Identification of an organizational hub system is a general way to proceed in the development of initiatives (i.e., deciding where in the organization the initiative will be housed while correspondingly identifying what organizational entities will serve as the spokes of the system to implement the initiative). Thus, the business school should undertake an analysis to identify where to house the major management responsibility of the initiative and what coordinated activities are needed to strengthening the student/faculty relationship relative to student reference letter needs. In so doing, this service is then defined as a systemic part of the educational process in the business school and is treated as a dynamic part of students' educational experiences. Therefore, infrastructure development issues will be discussed through the development of rationales and supporting structures that are needed to operationalize such an initiative.

## Why are reference letters important?

Many business schools aid students in their efforts to obtain employment, gain admission into graduate schools, secure entrance into study abroad programs, obtain internships, and to take advantage of a myriad of other opportunities. Positive outcomes of students' efforts reflect well on institutions as well as on students. Thus, in an effort to advance students' success in these areas, the organizational linkages must be constructed that lead to positive institution/faculty/student relationships. Integrating reference letter writing into a host of other student services and instructional strategies, such as resume writing and review services, will increase the probability of successful outcomes for future students' endeavors. Furthermore, such an initiative may enhance the professional payoff associated with a student's hard work and educational efforts, while successful placements reflect well on the business school itself. In other words, the design of this initiative also has the additional benefit of positively affecting efforts of reputation management for the business school as a whole.

## Why is a permanent infrastructure important in this effort?

Whose job is it anyway to support a reference writing initiative for students? In this case, the authors focus on a business school environment, so it will be the responsibility of the business school's senior leadership to initiate mandates that traverse their various departments and programs. When efforts expand across programs, the administration must gain vigorous commitment to a shared vision across departments or the likelihood of success will be severely hampered. W. Edwards Deming (1986), arguably one of the most noted quality scholars of all time, was clear on this point in his work, *Out of the Crisis*. He stated that there is no substitute for senior leadership gaining the commitment of employees across all areas involved in an endeavor. Further, he firmly held that clarity of purpose is essential to success and it is not likely that any initiative will succeed without a supporting, cohesive structure. The importance of aligning interdepartmental support, therefore, must be part and parcel of the school's priority.

### **Why is relationship marketing relevant to initiative building?**

In 1983, Leonard L. Berry first introduced the idea of relationship marketing in a paper he presented at the American Marketing Association's Services Marketing Conference. He stated, "Relationship marketing is attracting, maintaining and—in multi-service organizations—enhancing customer relationships." This concept of relationship marketing has gained much traction over the years; now the *Journal of Relationship Marketing* (JRM) is dedicated to this stream of research. Berry's original 1983 paper was reprinted in the JRM charter issue in 2002. In this issue, Berry (2002) offered fresh perspectives in commentary form. He stated that, at its best, relationship marketing is a philosophy that guides a way of thinking about those that are served. Further, Berry noted that relationship marketing is a holistic concept and is a sum of integrated parts that drive an organization's marketing competencies.

Gronroos (1994) described relationship marketing as mutually beneficial exchanges and the realization of promises by both parties in a series of interactions over the lifetime of a relationship. Recurrent themes have facilitated the effort of defining the domain of relationship marketing, especially trust, commitment, a long-term orientation, and co-operation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Bagozzi, 1995; Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 1991). According to Palmer (2002), relationship marketing has evolved and "is probably best understood as an umbrella concept which stresses the need to see exchanges from a long-term perspective rather than short-term." For the purposes of this paper, the philosophy of relationship marketing guides the authors' framework for building long-term student/faculty initiatives. The ongoing management of these relationships is seen as central to the success of permanent endeavors.

### **A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO REFERENCE LETTER WRITING**

The strategic objective of a reference letter writing initiative is multifaceted. First, the endeavor fosters and supports student efforts in filling their requirements for additional educational

and employment opportunities. Furthermore, professional student/faculty relationship management has the probability of strengthening the school's esprit de corps. Beyond the opportunity of showcasing students' talents and abilities, effective student reference letters have the potential for advancing the reputation of the overall organization, including nurturing lifetime student support of the school.

In proposing a multi-relational business school strategy for the development of the Student Reference Letter Project, the authors identified the following issues that will be addressed in the remainder of this paper:

1. The distinctive benefits of a systemic approach.
2. The coordination of a reference letter mandate.
3. Some practical suggestions for operationalizing the effort.
4. Suggested responsibilities of student and faculty.
5. Time considerations of students and faculty.
6. The value of unsolicited letters of recommendation.

### **What are the distinctive benefits of a systemic approach to reference letter writing?**

At a fundamental level, the benefits to students of this systemic approach to reference letter writing are the deeper relationships that develop with their professors and other institutional employees. As a result of these cultivated relationships, faculty members are in much better positions to write well-articulated and insightful recommendations that increase the likelihood that students will obtain the employment, graduate school admissions, internships, or other desired objectives.

Although the benefits to the students are sufficient to warrant the initiative, the benefits to the business school are also worthy of consideration. For example, the focus on building underlying requisite relationships necessary to write insight-

ful reference letters can also provide meaningful underpinnings on which to build successful alumni relations. Specifically, the successes enjoyed by students in terms of better employment opportunities or graduate admissions through professors' timely and quality involvement may also increase the willingness of the students to monetarily support the institution in the future. It is also important to develop the non-monetary benefits associated with this goodwill, including the willingness of alumni to return to the institution as guest lecturers, to visit as alumni executives, and to donate time in other ways. Furthermore, former students may return at a later point in time to recruit current students for internships or employment opportunities. As a result of these types of considerations, it would be reasonable to view a reference letter initiative as part of the circle-of-life paradigm for universities; reciprocity often occurs in mutually beneficial relationships.

#### **How should the need for coordination of a reference letter mandate be guided?**

The authors suggest that the mandate would come from the Dean's office with input from an appointed team. The development of an implementation process would vary across business schools and is, in part, dependent upon the existing organizational structures. For illustrative purposes, the authors suggest an organizational configuration that houses the management of the ongoing effort in one designated center.

A case in point advanced in the paper is the Career Management Center (CMC). This type of configuration is used at various levels of development with differing nomenclatures at many academic institutions. Many colleges within universities are now providing career management support at varying levels of sophistication in addition to the centralized university center. In many cases, CMCs have become highly specialized centers because job placement rate is a key variable in most business school rankings; consequently, many deans strongly support the combined center approach with faculty involvement. It is within such centers that the formal reference letter writing initiative could be housed, as these centers are many times the home of other student support services, such as etiquette classes, working-a-room exercises, personality testing, resume

writing, computer support programs and much more. Thus, it is within such business school centers that the reference letter writing initiative could be integrated for the purposes of illustrating development and usage of existing infrastructure.

The business program's CMC could manage and implement the initiative across programs and would have formal control for the educational development of the reference letter initiative, which would include administration, faculty, and students. For example, the center could establish and coordinate student orientation teams that develop a cohesive communication campaign, while simultaneously working with the Dean to obtain guidance in communicating the expectations. CMC could establish a strong virtual presence including narratives designed to advance student preparations relative to reference letter requests. Further, the CMC staff could develop orientation presentations for business students that explain the role of the CMC relative to reference letter writing. In reference to computer-aided resources, a practical format could be developed and recommended to students for their record-keeping purposes. For example, a link on the CMC website could house the forms that would aid students in these efforts. Included would be links to help students develop résumés that would be required as part of the reference letter request package given to faculty members.

The student's goal is clear and is as follows: "I help faculty members help me." Such a tagline can help brand the project as a two-way effort with students taking primary responsibility for managing their future. Table 1 provides a sample of a faculty reference letter request form. Students are advised to download the reference letter request form for computer management of their information over their tenure as a student. When students request a reference letter of faculty, they are instructed to print a completed reference letter request form and submit with an attached resume. When further customization is needed, the faculty member should receive the additional information from students.

When operationalizing this mandate, the center should coordinate communications with academic leadership and send out reminders to individual faculty to reinforce their role in the

**TABLE 1**  
**REFERENCE LETTER REQUEST FORM**

**“I Help Faculty Help Me.”**

Directions to Students: The goal of this request is to provide faculty members with information to help you with your reference letter needs. This data-sheet form along with your attached résumé is *necessary* information that you must provide to your professor so that they will be able to address your unique abilities and talents.

To: Professor \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Students Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

- I. Instructions for sending reference letter:
  - 1. The Recipient’s Name, Company or Institution, Department, etc.
  - 2. The Address of the Recipient
  - 3. Attach informational instructions that your professor may need
- II. Information about your goal in having a reference letter written.
- III. Information about the course(s) you have taken with the instructor, including the title of the course and the semester.
- IV. Any special information beyond what is noted on attached résumé, such as special projects, field trips, working with a professor on a project, etc.
- V. Attach your résumé to your email or if you provide a hard copy of your request, then attach a resume to the hard copy.

reference letter effort over time. Business school students could be sent mass communications periodically about their responsibility to organize reference letter request information by using the services of CMC. Various classes designated as student reinforcement opportunities could be identified where CMC representatives make brief announcements about the services they offer. In these classes, reminder communications would help with overall reinforcement effort. In this case, the responsibility and coordination of all updates of the Student Reference Letter Project would rest with the CMC, while the Office of the Dean would retain evaluative responsibility for ascertaining the success of the program.

**What are some practical suggestions in operationalizing the reference letter initiative for students?**

Practical tactics become paramount in implementing the letter-writing initiative. The authors have included orientations for undergraduate programs and majors, graduate programs, faculty meetings and new faculty orientations as areas to operationalize specific actions to discuss and distribute information about the student reference letter initiative.

## Student Orientations

At initial orientations, students admitted as freshmen or to graduate schools should be formally advised about the importance of reference letters for their future endeavors. Information sheets could be distributed that highlight the mission of the program with the specific student objectives. Specifically, reference letters are often required and, to a varying degree, may impact the outcomes associated with employment applications, internship or co-op applications, admissions to graduate school, scholarship applications, financial aid requests, and acceptances into study abroad or study away programs, obtaining fellowships or assistantship positions and other similar academic and professional opportunities.

A critical component of student orientation is ensuring that students are aware of the importance of getting to know their professors. Furthermore, it is important to discuss the significance of students' exhibited degree of professionalism as indicated by the quality of their work and the timeliness of their deliverables over their academic career. An orientation for new students also provides an excellent forum for reinforcing the importance of specific classroom performances, including group work and active participation in classes. This forum provides an excellent opportunity to highlight the need to develop deep interest in course work in order to advance a richer understanding of their academic pursuits. This systemic approach offers the potential opportunity of having a richer individualized learning experience. While these behaviors will better position the students to receive favorable recommendation letters, they also support a focused academic environment more conducive to learning.

It is important that students understand that professors will instruct many students over the course of their academic careers. This circumstance underscores the resultant difficulties that professors may encounter in writing meaningful, individualized reference letters, especially letters that speak to the students' unique abilities or potentials for further professional or academic endeavors. These circumstances should provide students further impetus to adopt a methodical approach for maintaining records of their supporting documents which will make the rec-

ommendation process easier for themselves and their professors. For example, students should be instructed to maintain the names of the classes, professors, times, semesters and any other pertinent information in a personal student computer file and avail themselves to suggested reference letter request forms that have been developed for their benefit. Students should be made aware that it is very time consuming to reconstruct academic and classroom information after time has passed. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to maintain a portfolio of their major works, including copies of significant papers, tests, projects, field trips, and study abroad courses. These efforts could be enhanced through the creation of online support for student information and portfolio management. In today's environment, technology is a major support mechanism for well-managed, evolved initiatives.

## Undergraduate Business School Majors

Each academic program could designate a specific required class early in each major where the mission of the reference letter initiative is reinforced. This course could provide an appropriate place to remind students about the importance of developing relationships with the faculty in their majors and about appropriate behaviors that will increase the likelihood of receiving beneficial reference letters. It is important to inform students that major classes tend to be smaller; therefore, there may be more substantial opportunities to get to know professors in these classes. Additionally, students should be made aware that recommendations emanating from major classes may be more pertinent for employment and graduate study opportunities.

A streamlined suggestion is for CMC to identify one required business course which all majors must enroll. For example, one logical required core course to integrate this information is Introduction to Marketing, because many introduction marketing courses incorporate a unit on personal marketing. Certainly, this initiative would rationally fit in to such a teaching unit.

## Graduate Programs

As with undergraduate programs, graduate-student orientations could incorporate similar

initiative guidelines. Directors of graduate programs could work with CMC to engage individual faculty members in reinforcing to students the mission of the reference letter initiative.

### Faculty Meetings

The Student Reference Letter Project could be added as an agenda item for the initial introduction in a faculty meeting. After the first couple of business school faculty meetings, the introduction of the Student Reference Letter Project could be moved to become a permanent part of all new business faculty orientations.

### Faculty Orientations

Given that new faculty members join the institution throughout the year, the Student Reference Letter Initiative should become a part of the ongoing faculty orientation process. From a tactical standpoint, the business school orientation, with the support of the Dean for such a mandate, could focus on creating a shared vision of the program with new faculty members, while CMC could discuss the specific implementation and departmental policies that support CMC tactical plans.

### **What are the specific responsibilities of the students and faculty?**

To develop a sense of practicality, well-crafted rationales for this undertaking must be provided to the stakeholders for active involvement. In order for the initiative to succeed, students must understand that they are responsible for obtaining letters of reference. As stated earlier, branding the initiative with a tagline would be helpful. It is the student's primary responsibility to provide professors with information regarding majors and minors, the specific classes they have taken, the exact classes they have taken with the professors, the times and semesters of those classes, and any complementary information about projects and activities that align with the opportunity or position for which they are seeking a reference letter.

With regard to professors, the initial school-wide campaign should inform faculty about their role in supporting students through well-composed

letters of reference. Professors should receive reminders and updates about the progress of the student support services.

In summary, this initiative should become a permanent part of both student and faculty orientations, which is guided by a permanent designated unit within the organization. In this case, the CMC is the designee. Faculty and students should be informed and reminded through planned interval reminders of the mutual student/professor responsibilities in regard to the program.

### **How can professors' time consideration be taken into account?**

In promoting a new initiative, school leaders must consider what major objections they may face from faculty. For example, many professors have extreme demands on their time, and time considerations should be acknowledged at the very launch of the process. To counter the potential for time objections, time-saving techniques incorporated into this approach should be noted at the beginning of the presentation as a major benefit. An example is used to illustrate this point.

Assume, for example, that many business undergraduates are applying to the same business school's MBA program. To aid professors in this reference letter process, three basic letter templates could be suggested: strongly support, moderately support, and mildly support. For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that if professors are not in a position to support a student, they will simply decline the request. Sample letter paragraphs could be developed in advance with the acknowledgement that each individual letter would be modified according to each student's unique situation.

Table 2 provides sample paragraphs of MBA reference letters for current enrollees in the institution's undergraduate business program. This initiative is sensitive to professors' time constraints and will give the professor a structured way to proceed, given template letters are prepared and can be easily modified based on the information students are expected to provide in their reference letter package.

**TABLE 2**  
**SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS FOR CURRENTLY ENROLLED STUDENT'S**  
**REQUESTING ADMISSION INTO THE UNIVERSITY'S MBA PROGRAM**

**Strongly Recommend**

It is with pleasure that I strongly recommend our undergraduate student, Luke Jones, to our Masters of Business Administration degree program at New Day University, as Luke was an excellent student in my undergraduate classes. He did outstanding work with his groups, he was well-prepared for classroom assignments, and he scored exceptionally well on his exams.

*Develop paragraph unique to the student.*

**Moderately Recommend**

It is with pleasure that I recommend our undergraduate student, Luke Jones, to our Masters of Business Administration degree program at New Day University. Luke was a very good student in my undergraduate classes. He worked well with his groups, and was prepared to discuss assignments in class. I consider Luke a good and conscientious student who should perform very well in his classes.

*Develop a paragraph unique to the student.*

**Mildly Recommend**

I recommend our undergraduate student, Luke Jones, to our Masters of Business Administration degree program at New Day University. Luke was a good student in my undergraduate classes. He worked with his groups, and was by and large prepared to discuss assignments in class. In general, I consider Luke to be a good student who has the potential to perform well in a Master's program.

*Develop a paragraph unique to the student.*

**Is it important to think of the value of unsolicited letters of support?**

The authors deem that the approach of writing unsolicited letters of student support may be of immeasurable value. For illustration purposes, assume there are student assistants that work in faculty support offices that have done excellent work. Specifically, assume that the assistants are not only technically good at what they do, but they are timely in their work and handle demanding situations in cheerful manners. They are intelligent, all-around good solid employees that serve the institution in distinctive ways. By writing an unsolicited letter of appreciation, it may serve as an enormous confidence builder for many students. These random acts of kindness will be long remembered by most. Sincere

acknowledgement goes a long way in building faculty/student/institutional relationships. It also may inspire others to "pay it forward" one day. Table 3 provides a sample of an unsolicited letter of support.

**CONCLUSION**

The authors support the goal of fostering and supporting student/faculty relationship building through the process of well-defined initiatives. For endeavors to be enduring, top leadership must develop and implement plans for the construction of supporting structures, in this case, within the existing infrastructure. It is through a well-defined organizational mandate with a sustaining organizational framework that business school initiatives can establish the foothold

**TABLE 3**  
**SAMPLE LETTER OF UNSOLICITED SUPPORT**

John J. Doe, Ph.D.  
Fine College of Business  
New Day University  
Spring South, Georgia 00010  
jdoe@springsouth.com  
007-007-0007  
October 31, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

It is with pleasure that I write this unsolicited letter of support for Luke Jones. I teach in the Fine College of Business at New Day University and have known Luke for several years. He has been an assistant for faculty members within the Business College and I would like others to know what a wonderful help he has been to me.

It has been my fortunate experience to work with Luke. He has always been so helpful and timely for every request I have had. He has been exceptionally helpful with computer issues and as everyone knows, if your computer is not working properly, your day is not going well. I had various software issues that Luke guided me through. When I would ask Luke for help, he was always gracious, kind, and patient. He made many of my days go so much smoother.

In addition, Luke managed many clerical requests and made sure that my exams, worksheets, and articles were ready in a timely manner. Although Luke worked under many time pressures, he was always efficient and cordial. It was good to know I could always count on his good-natured help.

I also observed how seriously Luke studied for his courses. I saw him study alone and in groups. He always appeared to be a dedicated student and interested in his courses.

I would like to recommend Luke to you as a wonderful employee. I have heard many faculty members comment on his personable attitude and helpful, pleasant responses to individual requests. I wish Luke the best in his future endeavors and will miss him greatly when he leaves New Day University.

Sincerely,

John J. Jones, PhD.  
Professor of Management  
Fine College of Business

needed to become part of the permanent organization. A multi-relational strategy for developing a social process is recommended as it involves coordinating various stakeholders to support the enduring effort. The specific responsibility for managing the endeavor must be assigned to a

specific unit for the day-to-day advancement of the new program's mission.

The hypothetical case of the Student Reference Letter Project was used to illustrate the creation of a new student/faculty initiative by constructing an infrastructure to support a permanent student services program. The purpose of the paper

was to provide rationales for developing a sustainable infrastructure that supports new mandates with a focus on constructing stakeholder linkages for relationship building and management purposes.

The Student Reference Letter Project was specifically developed as a student-centered case that would provide professional opportunities for both students and the institutions. Quality reference letters serve students by fulfilling requirements with regard to job applications, admissions to graduate school, acceptances into internship programs, inclusions into study abroad programs, and the granting of scholarships, along with a myriad of other similar opportunities. Because faculty members can have hundreds of students over time, the implementation of this project would give professors the needed information to produce quality reference letters for their students in a timely manner. The initial responsibility of information gathering is placed with the student.

In conclusion, the hypothetical case was developed, in general, to illustrate the process of creating a relationship-building infrastructure that would support an ongoing initiative. While the illustration focused on an academic initiative, clearly the approach set forth could serve as a general guide for approaching initiatives of any organization. The scope of the initiative was limited to business schools for brevity sake, but certainly such initiative infrastructure issues are important across institutional planning efforts.

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