Service Quality And Higher Education Do Mix

A case study exploring the service environment at Indiana University Southeast

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For many years, the notions of service quality and higher education seemed about as compatible as oil and water. Clearly, institutions steeped in decades, often centuries, of tradition were not the most fertile soil in which to plant continuous improvement initiatives.

However, that is slowly changing. Several years ago, Indiana University Southeast (IU Southeast), like all universities, started feeling the ground shift beneath its feet. Market forces were exerting themselves against the ivory tower and beginning to precipitate a fundamental transformation. Students were becoming more savvy and discriminating in selecting institutions of higher learning. State funding criteria were changing-student retention and graduation rates were becoming more heavily weighted, for example. Nongovernmental funding sources were becoming more selective and demanding in allocating their discretionary dollars.

Organizational change typically comes about as a result of a visionary leader or compelling externals forces. By 1996, both of these conditions were in place at IU Southeast. Located in New Albany, IN, the university serves more that 6,100 students and offers a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Recognizing that universities would have to start competing for students, IU Southeast's chancellor made his vision clear. The university needed to establish a reputation for providing high-quality experiences for all students. Failure to attract or satisfy students would negatively impact enrollment and retention and, ultimately, funding, job security and the viability of the university.

Leadership

The first step in translating the vision into reality was to establish a framework for leadership. The chancellor began regular "walk arounds" to informally chat with several of the university's nonacademic staff in their own work settings, as well as meet some of the 460 resident and adjunct faculty. The objective was to create a more open and engaging atmosphere and to build a sense of common purpose and mutual support. The topic of service quality became a regular part of these walk around visits.

The visits led to the realization that providing a better environment for students largely depended on faculty and staff. However, given limited resources and a bias toward producing quick wins, the chancellor decided that the initial emphasis should be placed on improving service quality within each of the university's 24 nonacademic departments. This did not preclude concurrent faculty centered efforts such as the establishment of a center to improve a teaching quality.

A quality service and staff development committee (QSSD) was formed to serve as the guiding body for promoting and supporting service quality at IU Southeast. The specific roles of the QSSD were outlined and documented. Next, a mission statement for the service quality initiative was crafted:

The purpose of the IU Southeast service quality initiative is to create a more service oriented environment in order to help attract, educate, retain and graduate students.

The QSSD decided that it was important to understand the prevailing atmosphere on campus and identify key issues. It also recognized that if staff members were going to be asked to change and be supportive, they needed to be involved early in the process and given a voice on issues directly affecting them. One staff member said he wanted to have meaningful input in designing a recipe for change rather than having someone come to him after "the cake was already baked."

A comprehensive staff survey was developed to meet these objectives. The 170-item survey was based on a set of six dimensions identified as common to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and the management and organizational performance literatures. These included: planning, culture, management of work force, system processes, performance measurement and feedback, and outcomes.1 Of the 222 nonfaculty staff who comprised the survey sample 68% responded. The results highlighted numerous opportunities for improvement such as goal setting, customer orientation, and rewards and recognition. With the help of a facilitator from Indiana University (IU), each department developed a service mission statement along with a supporting list of service standards. Together, the survey results, mission statements and service standards helped identify priorities for subsequent service quality improvement projects. With the foundation set, a model was created for service quality improvement (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The IU Southeast Model For Service Quality Improvement

1. Impetus - A visionary leader, Compelling external forces
2. Vision - High-quality, experiences for all students
3. Leadership:
Chancellor

- Walk arounds

QSSD

- Staff survey
- Missions & service standards

4. Quality Management:
Communications

- Communications matrix

Quality support

- Vice chancellors' support plan
- Vice chancellors' training

Quality implementation - Service quality training, Quality improvement projects, Project Support

5. Recognition - Campuswide recognition, Vice chancellor recognition

Creating a quality management plan

The quality management plan focused on two elements: communications and quality support. These factors were crucial to the project's initial success as well as its long-term self-sustainability.

Communications. Since service quality impacts such a board range of stakeholders, a comprehensive communications matrix was developed. The objectives of the matrix were to keep stakeholders informed, gather input and feedback, gain buy-in and support, and minimize or prevent misperceptions that might arise.

Eight stakeholder groups were identified: the chancellor, vice chancellors, managers and supervisors, staff, deans and faculty, students, other IU campuses and the university's surrounding community. A plan was developed for each stakeholder, outlining the purpose of the communication, medium, content, duration or length, frequency and timing, and person responsible.

The plans were compiled in a communications matrix (see table 1) and were implemented, monitored and revised throughout the initiative.

Table 1: Communication Matrix (select elements)

Stakeholder	Purpose	Medium	Content	Duration/length	Freq./timing	Responsible
Chancellor	Update & discuss key issues	In person meeting	Current status of training, projects, communications, leadership and quality support; key issues	45 minutes	Monthly, starting fall 1997	Michael, Keith and Ann
Staff	Gain feedback and	Survey questionnaire, Walk arounds	Multiple, categorized questions, The	225, 5-10 minutes per discussion	Biannually, starting fall 1997,	Patrick, Chancellor, QSSD and vice

	input, Update and gain input	and informal, in person discussions	service quality initiative; key departmental issues		Regularly, fall 1997 and ongoing	chancellors
Students	Inform	IU Southeast Horizon student newspaper	overview of service quality initiative and progress to date	1 page article	Each semester, starting spring 1999	The QSSD communications champion
Other IU campuses	Inform	IU Home Page newsletter	Overview of service quality initiative and progress to date	4 pages - multiple articles	Annually, starting spring 1999	The QSSD communications champion

Quality Support. The QSSD recognized that it is much easier to create change than to sustain it and was concerned about sustaining the momentum for service quality.

The QSSD determined that the vice chancellors were key where sustaining change was concerned. The four vice chancellors represented the critical link between the chancellors represented the critical link between the chancellor's vision and the operational and motivational realities faced by managers, supervisors and their staffs. The most important factor in sustaining service quality would be the ability of the vice chancellors to create an environment that supports the human side of change. When postmortems of failed initiatives are conducted, the reason most frequently cited as causal is the failure to adequately address people related issues.[2,3]

To avoid this outcome, the vice chancellors developed a quality support plan to promote and sustain change through people. The plan focused on aligning, individually and collectively, nine key processes with the objectives of the service quality initiative: recruitment and selection, communications, training and development, incentives and disincentives, resource allocation, power allocation, measurement, coaching, support and feedback, and reinforcement and accountability (see Table 2).

Everyone recognized that implementing the plan would have to take place in phases and could last several years. The plan elements were prioritized, implemented and monitored on an ongoing basis. The chancellor played an important role by supporting the plan and holding the vice chancellors accountable for its progress and outcomes.

To help the vice chancellors support change, a number of training modules were developed and delivered with specific needs in mind. These included: developing personal rapport, building trust, confronting with a positive orientation, and giving constructive feedback and recognition. In addition, the vice chancellors helped to develop a list of roles that they themselves would undertake in support of service quality.

Table 2: Quality Support Plan

Support plan element	Objective	Approach (select examples)
Recruitment and selection	Getting the right people in the right positions at the right time.	Include in all job descriptions and the selection process criteria for "the orientation toward and commitment to service quality."
Communications	Outlining the vision, objectives, rationale and expectations.	Convey the expectations that goals and objectives relating to quality be incorporated into the plans of each manager.
Training and development	Providing the knowledge and skills to do what is required.	Provide staff the opportunity to attend at least one service quality related training session annually.
Incentives and disincentives	Establishing the prospective "what's in it for me?"	Establish a performance review and planning process that incorporates the principles of service quality.
Resource allocation	Providing the time, tools, technology, equipment and materials.	Encourage departments to allocate resources proportionate to the value of the processes they support.
Power allocation	Providing the appropriate authority to make decisions.	Encourage and support well-conceived risk taking.
Measurement	Providing metrics to determine progress and success.	Support university wide assessment of programs based on higher-level, quality related objectives
Coaching, support and feedback	Providing guidance, insight, encouragement and perspective.	Establish relationships with managers that are built on trust, honesty and open communications.
Reinforcement and accountability	Delivering the "what's in it for me?" outcomes	Recognize the results of each service quality improvement project.

Implementing quality

The quality implementation plan focused on department level service quality improvement projects facilitated through training and project support.

Service quality training. In preparation for their service quality improvement projects, each of the university's departments (such as career services and physical plant) attended a just-in-time service quality training session. The purpose was to introduce a 10-step quality improvement cycle, explain methods for advancing through the steps and identify the first process for improvement (see Figure 2). A number of standard quality tools were

also introduced, including brainstorming, process mapping, check sheets, cause and effect diagrams, force field analysis and various charting techniques.

Figure 2: 10-Step Quality Improvement Cycle

1. Identify a process
2. Define the purpose of the process
3. Identify the primary customers
4. Determine the customers' expectations about the process
5. Determine if expectations are being met and identify opportunities for improvement
6. Identify root causes
7. Plan improvements
8. Implement improvements
9. Evaluate improvements
10. Revise as needed

Project support. Armed with direction, knowledge and skills, the departments were given other means to further enable their success. A member of the QSSD, a quality liaison, was assigned to each department to provide guidance, feedback and support throughout the duration of its project. Similarly, each team also received help from an external consultant, and vice chancellors met with their respective departments to demonstrate support for the initiative and to solicit questions and comments about the process.

Documentation explaining the basics of the service quality initiative was provided and reviewed with each department. A support document on effective teamwork was also distributed and reviewed. Finally, a monthly, campuswide quality support group was convened for sharing experiences and peer learning.

Quality improvement projects. Each department selected a process for its quality improvement project based on several criteria: its importance to the customer, the extent to which improving it was within departmental control, how likely the project was to succeed and the time required for it to succeed. Data, collected by surveys, focus groups and other methods, were used to help select a process and other methods, were used to help select a process, validate an intuitively damaged process or determine the extent to which a process needed repair.

To allow each department to receive greater attention and avoid the effects of massive disruption, the departments initiated their projects in phases. As evaluated by the QSSD and vice chancellors, departments that seemed more likely to succeed, were considered highly visible and had projects with greater impacts would start their projects sooner. Once the start order was complete, departments were placed into groups, with a different group beginning its projects every month.

Projects took from six to 12 months to complete. During that time, each department worked through the 10-step quality improvement cycle. A project documentation guide

helped each team record its progress and provided a structured way to present its experiences to others. It was consistently emphasized that the projects were not one-time events, but models for continuous improvement.

Results

In December 1997, 24 service quality improvement projects were initiated. While not all of the projects are completed yet, 14 of them (58%) have yielded measurable improvements.

One of the best examples of a team successfully implementing the 10-step quality improvement cycle (see Figure 2) was the bookstore. The bookstore identified transaction processing during rush periods as its project (step 1). The purpose of the process is to provide students, the primary customers, with clear simple access to their required books as well as prompt and effective sales transactions (steps 2 and 3). Student feedback corroborated that this was what the study body expected (step 4).

Unfortunately, the typical rush period scenario involved throngs of students chaotically trying to locate books and then standing in long lines (step 5). Dissatisfaction was prevalent and often vocal. Bookstore staff members took this feedback, examined their process and identified 21 root causes that, if changed, would improve service (step 6).

Plans were developed to implement 19 of the changes (step 7). These included reallocating cash register functions, better signage and maps, improving the book ordering process and appointing a sales representative at the store entrance step 8).

During the next semester's rush period, a representative sample of bookstore customers (students) was surveyed (step 9). About 78% of the respondents found it easier to locate their required books, and 76% said that book availability was improved. About 90% said they spent less time in the cashier's line than before, and 94% rated the attitude of the bookstore staff as improved. As a follow-up, the bookstore identified additional improvements, such as online functions, that should further enhance service during subsequent rush periods (step 10).

Other highlights

- A customer survey helped the campus services department identify customer education and assistance as its targeted process. Changes included a revised requisition process, e-mail updates, personal visits, a revised central stores catalog and stocking process, and improved scheduling and staffing. A follow-up survey revealed that 70% of customers felt more informed and 70% felt better supported than before.
- The Paul W. Ogle Cultural and Community Center selected the sales of program advertising process as its improvement endeavor. As a result of the quality improvement cycle, the number of ads increased by 236% and revenues increased

by 187%. Advertisers communicated a high degree of satisfaction with the finished ads.

- Process mapping helped student financial assistance and accounting services streamline and clarify a promissory note process. Consequently, the number of loans credited to students' accounts prior to the mailing of fees increased by more than six times.
- The registrar and bursary collaborated to improve a transcript request process. The results were one-stop shopping, a streamlined process, less student irritation and greater staff satisfaction.
- Focus groups helped human resources identify customer contact as a key process in need of improvement. Specific, supporting behaviors were identified, and experiential skills training was conducted with the staff. A follow-up survey asked customers to compare before and after performance for nine dimensions of service. Almost 30% of respondents said that overall service quality each specified dimension were improved.
- A division for undeclared majors improved the marketing process of its advising activities by implementing a 14-point promotional plan. The results were greater attendance in group-advising sessions, less need for individual advising and net savings in advisor hours.
- The physical plant greatly improved its work order communications process by implementing a structured customer contact program.
- Career services improved the internship registration process by reducing the required number of student contact points, consolidation forms and eliminating nonvalue-added steps.
- The student development center improved its placement test scheduling by offering Saturday testing and testing dates earlier in the summer.
- The continuing studies department enhanced its advertising effectiveness process by first analyzing the return on its investment and promotion.

Lesson learned

Many lessons were learned throughout the course of the initiative. Some confirmed the decisions made and actions taken, and others taught us what we should have done differently. We learned eight key concepts:

1. Recognizing improvement. Recognizing those who complete the service quality improvement cycle was integral to creating and sustaining momentum for service quality. The most visible mechanism for recognition was our campuswide, quality celebration gathering. This semiannual session, hosted by the chancellor, allows each department that has completed an improvement project to present its story to the university community. Binders of documentation for each success story are given to every department The vice chancellors introduce successes, brief presentations are made and certificates are given to each department. The presentation of numerous, documented success stories along with executive and peer recognition creates a very energized and positive atmosphere.
2. Set the table. Establish a guiding committee and an overall mission. The roles played by the QSSD were essential to the successes and progress achieved.

Similarly, create a communications matrix. For any initiative, there are many stakeholders with varied needs. A comprehensive communications matrix can help establish focus and expectations, communicate progress and results, shape perceptions, and gain valuable input and buy-in.

A quality support plan is also important. This is the cornerstone of sustaining service quality. An environment must be created that aligns the processes that impact people with objectives of service quality.

3. Don't get everyone on board. The game is about achieving critical mass, not 100% commitment. Too often, excessive time is spent trying to convince those who are unwilling to change. Instead, spend more time with the people who are willing to make change happen. Build a wave of momentum that drives the organization forward.

4. Prioritize the approach. It is impossible to do everything at once. Build a track record of success, reinforce success and create energy for change. For example, one of our key decisions was to begin the initiative by focusing on the nonacademic departments. Another key decision was to prioritize the start order of the departments, scheduling departments to begin their projects at different times-not all at once.

5. Sell the personal benefits. Let people know how they specifically will benefit from service quality. Late in the initiative a list of benefits from people's experiences was compiled and communicated across departments. Doing this earlier would have lessened the resistance to change.

6. Be careful with the term "customer." Using the term "customer" in academia can arouse many emotions, preconceptions and misconceptions." 4 While it is true that universities must become more service oriented, referring to students as customers does not mean that faculty and administration cannot or should not drive the educational agenda. Nor does it mean that it is always possible or even desirable to meet students' wishes. Students still have responsibilities. However, none of these arguments should be used as a convenient excuse for poor service.

7. Don't jump to conclusions. The natural mode of problem solving is to quickly jump from defining the problem to the solution. This is almost always premature and leads, at best, to temporary solutions. Proper analysis of a problem often reveals that there are multiple root causes and, therefore, complex solutions. Be patient, talk to the customers and consider the opinions of those who are not recognized "experts."

8. Talk - action = zero. Don't jump to conclusions, but don't dwell on endless analysis either. A sound plan that is well-executed is superior to a great plan that is poorly (or never) executed.

IU Southeast began its quality journey because of a visionary chancellor who saw the forces of change exerting themselves. While the initial results are promising, much remains to be done. The vice chancellors' quality support plan will take on increasing importance. And processes that cut across departmental boundaries should receive greater attention.

However, the larger issue speaks to the notions of service quality and higher education. With efforts underway like those at IU Southeast, the oil and water incompatibility is dissolving. And, as those in fields other than education have discovered, there is no turning back.

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Foot Notes

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