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## In the Business of Learning: Faithful Consumerism

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### Abstract

The landscape of higher education is rapidly evolving. The amenities arms race is in full swing as institutions vie for student attention, choice, and dollars. The very competition that wins institutions their best and brightest, and affords institutional survival, bolsters a consumer mindset amongst students that undermines the learner-centered values institutions exist to espouse. Current cultural and societal norms, along with the actions of institutions themselves—treating students as customers—have unsurprisingly left students and higher education professionals facing a new challenge: determining how to helpfully engage consumer-minded students to help them become better learners. This paper explores one approach—utilizing the language of faith—that emerged as an answer to this question within a larger study. Further, this paper discusses and explores the implications of this claim—within the consumer-learner paradox—for higher education professionals, specifically those working at faith-based institutions.

## Introduction

Consumeristic thinking, resulting from rising levels of competition within the higher education marketplace, is an increasingly prevalent reality among students. In evaluating such competition, Derek Bok (2013) offers, “The effort and initiative that rivalry inspires are to the good when directed toward goals that are clearly worthwhile. They are not so advantageous, however, when universities compete with one another in pursuing aims of more questionable nature” (p. 389). As enrollment continues to rise, competition for the best students escalates. To maintain enrollment levels and thus revenue, institutions compete for students by offering bigger and better facilities (Eckel & King, 2004; Sightlines, 2016). The most recent *State of Facilities in Higher Education* report notes, “In the last century, colleges and universities have become more residential and offer more campus services, like dining and recreation options, to make living on campuses more attractive to prospective students” (Sightlines, 2016, p. 5). Sadly, “students often demand that more fun stuff, rather than deep learning occur” within new buildings (McCluskey, 2016), thus actively increasing cost with little regard to educational quality. Moreover, students and parents increasingly question the long-term value of investing in a college degree (Manning, 2015).

In trying to both prove worth and justify cost, colleges and universities may be entering into a downward spiral of accommodating and marketing to student preference for entertainment and comfort through material provisions. In doing so, institutions reinforce students’ perceptions of themselves as consumers of universities. However, the fundamental purposes of educational institutions have long been to grow students as learners and critical thinkers. As such, one might assume that when higher education institutions are fulfilling their intended purposes—purposing to develop students as learners and thinkers—there might be natural dissuasion of such consumeristic ideation. Accordingly, a gap in the literature leaves room for further understanding the relationship between consumerism and student learning as well as the impact of a liberal education on consumer mindsets of students.

This paper focuses primarily on the implications of a single theme that emerged during a much larger study. The following research question guided the portion of the study most relevant to this paper:

*To what aspects of their liberal education would students attribute increases or decreases in consumeristic thinking and learning?*

## Literature Review

### The Student as Consumer Paradigm

Thinking “student” is congruent with “consumer” is the basis of the student consumer analogy, which views education as transactional (Snare, 1997, p. 122). Consumer ideology asserts education is a buyable and sellable product and that students can pay money in exchange for knowledge (Snare, 1997). Klinger (n.d.) astutely points out the ways consumerism pervades cultural identity, even impacting the language students and educators use. She explains “students ‘get’ grades rather than earn them, and ‘go to’ or ‘attend’ college rather than contribute to the learning and educational processes” (Klinger, n.d., p. 5).

Consequently, the world of higher education becomes a marketplace where people gather to “buy and sell their wares” (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 2). McMillan and Cheney explain that with the development of capitalism, “the buyer assumed a more central position in an economic system characterized (at least some of the time) by open competition”—further fostering a consumeristic culture (pp. 2-3). Institutions are then compelled to market to consumers in order to sell their product. Bok (2003) laments, “Observing these trends, I worry that commercialization may be changing the nature of academic institutions in ways we will come to regret” (p. x).

Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) identify five consumption values they believe influence consumer choice: functional value; social value; emotional value; epistemic value; and conditional value. Sheth et al. explain functional value involves perceived utility and a “capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance” and is “traditionally... viewed as the primary driver of consumer choice” (p. 160). Epistemic value, which is measured in terms of arousing curiosity, providing novelty, or satisfying a desire for knowledge (Sheth et al., 1991), takes a back seat to functional value, especially within higher education today. The Higher Education Research Institute’s 2015 national survey of incoming freshmen gives ample evidence of this reality. Incoming college students are increasingly concerned with getting a return on investment. Of all incoming freshmen participating in the 2015 study, 81.9% deemed “being very well off financially” as an essential or very important objective and 85% deemed “being able to get a better job” as a very important factor in deciding to go to college (Eagan et al., 2015). Freshmen also identified academic reputation and future job prospects as the top

reasons for choosing a particular college (Eagan et al., 2015). Delucchi and Korgen (2002) voice concern over the way this consumeristic attitude increasingly sees universities as places where pre-established needs can be bought and sold (p. 101).

Much research has gone into identifying characteristics of students which are thought to have emerged out of consumeristic thinking. These characteristics include academic entitlement (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Crage, 2014; Marshall et al., 2015; Singleton et al., 2010; Snare, 1997), disengagement and lack of personal responsibility (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Crage, 2014; Marshall et al., 2015; Plunkett, 2014), an emphasis on entertainment (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Plunkett, 2014), and a need for control (Singleton et al., 2010). Understanding student consumer dispositions is important in understanding the ways consumerism impacts learning.

#### Consumerism's Subversion of Educational Values

With the student-consumer model, higher education has willingly shifted toward a business model. This shift proves troubling as the mission of a business is fundamentally at odds with that of an educational institution (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Crage, 2014; Harris, 2007; McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Potts (2005) even goes so far as to say “the consumer model of higher education marks a fundamental assault on higher education, destroying it from within” (p. 55). This shift is one that Fairchild and Crage (2014) note is synonymous with the change from viewing education as a public good—developing democratic and well-rounded citizens capable of advancing society—to viewing education as a tool meant primarily for private social advancement. Not only so, but while the traditional mission of higher education is to facilitate learning, businesses exist largely to make a profit. In order to increase profit margins, businesses employ certain practices that, when extended to education, are harmful.

For example, it is common knowledge that the best business is the one with the most profit, gained by attracting either an increased number of customers or customers willing to pay more for a given product (Davis, 2011). To acquire more high-paying customers, institutions market to students based on demand and satisfaction. Such a customer-centric model is accompanied by the belief, in word and practice, that “the customer is always right.” A business model holds that when students complain classes are too boring, hard, or uncomfortable—they are right. Unfortunately, such a mentality is at odds with feelings of

dissonance—identified as a central catalyst to learning in psychosocial and cognitive development theories (Evans et al., 2010).

Delucchi and Korgen (2002) address and counter a business model for higher education saying, “A folk wisdom of the market—that the customer is always right—can be pedagogically irresponsible when adopted in the classroom” (p. 106). Students often avoid discomfort, challenge, and constructive criticism (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild & Crago, 2014)—even though these typically cause the deepest levels of academic growth. Quite literally in education, the student is not always right (Fairchild & Crago, 2014) and certainly not always comfortable. Davis (2011) clarifies the interaction between dissonance and learning:

Especially where values, ethics, and deeply ingrained traditions are associated, feelings of anger and resentment (natural to disequilibrium) often occur. Educational institutions are uniquely called on by society... to challenge students to more deeply integrate for themselves a more cogent, differentiated understanding. (p. 87)

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Davis further explains the educator always holds some level of expertise. Otherwise, students would not likely pay tuition to learn from him or her (Davis, 2011).

In summary, consumeristic thinking subverts traditional educational values. Operating an institution under business assumptions subverts the core educational value of student learning by shifting institutional focus away from student growth in favor of customer satisfaction. Moreover, when consumer-minded students view themselves as customers to be satisfied, student dispositions fostering learning are undermined.

#### Conclusion

Current literature suggests the rising prevalence of consumeristic thinking among college students threatens traditional values of education. A transactional mindset of payment for product results in shifting student expectations. Students expect institutions to satisfy them as customers by conferring academic outcomes in the forms of grades and degrees. Consequently, students feel academically entitled, are disengaged, desire to be entertained, and assume a right to control comfort levels in their learning environments. Such characteristics oppose the values of involvement and disequilibrium foundational to learning.

In his article *The Threats to Liberal Arts Colleges*, Paul Neely (1999) addresses the way liberal arts colleges “may be slowly undermined by the

growth

economics of their business and the marketing of their product...the results [possibly] challeng[ing] the very purpose for which those schools exist” (pp. 29-30). Though the article represents the large-scale effects of consumerism on liberal arts institutions, the literature fails to show how one’s education promotes or impedes consumer orientations. Furthermore, the literature reveals very little concerning if and how these mentalities change, especially in an environment—such as a Christian or liberal arts institution—where one might expect shifts in consumeristic thinking to occur.

## Methodology

The larger study explored the relationships between students’ consumer orientations, learner identities, and experiences at a liberal arts institution using a two-phase embedded sequential design. The quantitative first phase of the study employed a correlational design in which a survey instrument relating consumerism and learning dispositions of students was utilized. The survey also included two open-ended response items. In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students’ perceptions of their university’s impact on their consumer orientations. Because this paper focuses on the implications of a theme that emerged during the qualitative phase of the research, presented methodology is limited only to relevant methodologies.

### Participants

Data collection occurred at a small, Christian, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The population of the residential institution is approximately 2,000 students. The survey was completed by about 222 students and the focus group consisted of six participants. For the purposes of the larger study, the survey was administered in two required courses, one a freshman course and one a senior. Otherwise, both groups were roughly representative of the demographics of the larger institution and represented a wide variety of majors.

### Procedure

The qualitative phase assessed student perceptions of their own consumer and learner orientations through two open-ended survey items followed by a semi-structured focus group interview. After emailing selected participants to schedule the focus group, the researcher gave participants a handout with brief explanations of a consumer and a learner—to help focus responses on the constructs in the study. The researcher

asked a series of questions concerning the participant's perceptions of the ways in which his or her liberal arts education impacted his or her consumer orientation and the complex nature of the relationship between consumerism and learning. Since the overall study employed an embedded design, the qualitative interview questions emerged out of the first phase of the study (Creswell, 2012, p. 556). A phenomenological design was used to describe the essence of individuals' shared experiences of a common concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2009, p. 76). The research explored the phenomenon of student consumerism. In developing a textual description and a structural description of student experiences, the researcher sought to develop "a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals" (Creswell, 2009, p. 76-80).

### Analysis

The data gathered from the open-ended responses was explored and used to develop codes (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). The researcher first explored the data to attain a general sense and then coded the data (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). As Creswell (2012) recommended, the researcher "divide[d] [data] into text or image segments, label[ed] the segments with codes, examine[d] codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse[d] these codes into broad themes" (p. 243). In doing so, the researcher began to make sense out of the data to answer the research questions.

### Results

The qualitative findings explore the complex relationship existing between consumerism and learning. The open-ended questions intentionally allowed students to identify the components of their education they thought did or did not impact their thinking as consumers and learners. The subsequent focus group then gave participants opportunities to clarify further themes identified in the open-ended responses.

Similar to the existing literature, throughout qualitative data collection, students consistently held consumerism and learning apart from one another as if the two variables—competing for limited attention—exist on opposite ends of a spectrum. Students are undeniably aware of the forces of consumerism at play in the education system of which they are a part, openly identifying themselves as consumers out of a necessity to deal with the very real pressures they face to get jobs, pay back debt, etc.

That being said, for students who ideally would like to be learners rather than consumers, faith proved an important factor in informing

an emphasis on learning. For at least 47 survey participants (21%), an educational emphasis on faith—linking to a sense of spiritual vocation—served as the primary motivator for learning. While some students expressed an emphasis on learning as a means of glorifying God in their current context and role, others emphasized the importance of being learners in the present because of their calling to glorify God in their specific field upon graduation. In considering the role of faith, focus group participants equated learning with truth-seeking, saying, “the pursuit of that truth is, in a sense, like worship . . . and tying that into my faith and saying, like, this is also like a pursuit of God.” Due to an institutional emphasis on faith, students claimed to be more aware of the importance of stewarding learning opportunities and abilities as a means of glorifying God.

Thus, the study yielded a meaningful answer to the question, “To what aspects of their liberal education would students attribute increases or decreases in consumeristic thinking and learning?” To the students surveyed, the fact that their institution was academically and culturally rooted in faith—specifically Christianity—helped them aspire toward and identify more readily as learners.

## Implications

There is no doubt that increasingly present consumeristic narratives and tendencies affect both students and institutions. Given the high cost of college, students would be naïve never to consider the value of their degree in an increasingly competitive job market. Conversely, administrators understand that failing to impress and compete for prospective students has the potential to impact enrollment in ways that threaten the very survival of the institution. Within this consumer context, institutions are wrong to assume student consumers are entirely fixed or one-dimensional in their mindsets. However, students undeniably do arrive at institutions needing help unravelling the complex relationship between consumerism and learning. Students—both bound by the realities of consumerism and deeply desiring to be learners—are struggling to make sense of an educational system that treated them as consumers when high school students, but now chides them for acting accordingly on campus.

The literature provides evidence of the way scholars—professors, staff, and administrators—too often view student consumers through a lens of overwhelming negativity. Instead, educators, particularly Christian

educators, ought to recognize the present reality students are facing, extend grace, and look forward with hope by intentionally embracing both student realities. In this way, students might similarly be taught to embrace both their consumer and learner identities, acknowledging how the two might be brought together in a balanced relationship. In an increasingly consumeristic culture, institutions have a heightened responsibility to help students grow as learners—pushing students to become their self-proclaimed ideal selves—without fostering an ignorance of very real cultural and societal pressures revealed within students' consumer mentalities.

To this end, faith—particularly the Christian faith—played a far more significant role in promoting learning than expected. As such, it is a crucial component to helping students navigate the consumer-learner paradox. But what are the practical implications of such claims for educators? The implications are plentiful, but require investment on the part of educators to reframe the perceptions surrounding both consumerism and learning by engaging both realities within thoughtful dialogue with students. Particularly for those serving at Christian and other faith-based institutions, ample opportunities exist for leaders and educators to engage in these types of conversations because the common faith language already present on most of these campuses allows Christian educators to reshape dialogue on consumerism and learning in extremely helpful ways.

For example, career offices at faith-based institutions regularly use the language of vocation, purpose, and calling when counselling students. Within the contexts of these conversations, educators can clearly and directly challenge students to think critically about the importance of learning as a means of living out one's calling, either in the present as a student or in the future as a professional. Such conversations should be the norm outside of the calling and career office as well. Professors and staff across disciplines should seek to help students view their learning in terms of present and future calling, beseeching students to glorify God with their minds and actions. Students would likely benefit from engaging professionals from calling and career offices early on in their academic career, maybe during orientation or in a required freshman course.

Similarly, instilling the Christian value of stewardship is incredibly meaningful. While many higher education professionals—not wanting to encourage negative dispositions in students—altogether avoid

the topic of consumerism, reframing the conversation in terms of stewardship allows educators to move toward positive conversations of consumerism. Instead of shying away from conversations about the high cost of a private Christian education, educators can embrace the conversation with new purpose. Encouraging—not hindering—student awareness of the high cost of education allows space to talk about the responsibility that comes with opportunity. Moreover, opportunity invokes the idea that education is a gift not afforded to all. Graciously accepting such a gift involves maximizing one’s experience by taking advantage of the many ways an institution provides for students’ holistic development. Students engaged in conversations of education rooted in faith are being developed into fortunate maximizers rather than entitled minimizers. Thus, administrators and leaders ought to get excited about the growth occurring when faith is allowed to inform and animate learning.

#### Limitations

The most significant limitation in the study is the institution type: a small, private, Christian liberal arts institution. Additionally, all aspects of the study were voluntary. Students who participated—especially in qualitative portions—likely were interested in the topic. Moreover, the study intentionally included only freshmen and seniors as a means of exploring change in perceptions over time. However, doing so left out current sophomores and juniors whose perspectives may not be accurately portrayed by senior participants’ reflections. Lastly, though the researcher employed bracketing to avoid introducing any personal bias, some may be evident.

#### Future Research

This paper focuses on the role faith plays within the consumer-learner paradigm, a single theme that emerged during a larger study that had no initial focus on exploring faith at all. Therefore, future studies exploring the relationships between various Christian educational approaches and either consumerism or learning would expand the existing literature base significantly.

#### Conclusion

Part of the challenge of the consumer-learner paradox is that neither aspect can be ignored by students in today’s educational context nor ignored by higher education institutions. In many ways, students, as well as higher education faculty and administrators, need to acknowledge the very real and pressing consumer realities (i.e., getting a job,

paying off debt, etc.). However, students are currently left trying to find an appropriate balance between the two. Though a potentially daunting task, institutional leaders ought to find encouragement in the tremendous opportunities existing to provide students the environments and supports needed to engage and grow as learners. Faith—already a part of the institutional context of so many of this journal’s readers—plays an important role in providing students the framework necessary for better navigating the consumer-learner paradox during their formative college years. When educators work to this end, institutions are better positioned to fulfill their foundational purposes, namely student growth and learning.

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