

# POLICY PERSPECTIVES

## The State of Academic Customer Service on U.S. Campuses



Neal Raisman



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Neal A Raisman** is a leading authority and consultant on customer service and retention in higher education. Dr. Raisman's best selling books such as *The Power Of Retention: More Customer Service In Higher Education*, have been purchased by 63 percent of all colleges in the U.S. In 2012 the Educational Policy Institute published another Policy Perspectives by Dr. Raisman titled *The Cost of College Attrition at Four-Year Colleges & Universities*.

Dr. Raisman's work in customer service began in 1999 when hired to figure out why a large multi-campus college was losing students. Dr. Raisman has worked with over 400 colleges in the United States, Canada, and Europe to research and solve customer service issues. He also works with corporations and businesses that wish to better understand the higher ed market and students.

Raisman is a highly sought after speaker, trainer, consultant, researcher, and marketer on customer service. His firm, N.Raisman & Associates, is the leading customer service consulting group for retention, enrollment, morale, and marketing for higher education and businesses that work with colleges in the US, Canada, and Europe. MAPS' technological solutions include the award and enrollment winning Leadwise personalization system plus web re-designs and analysis. His customer service and retention blog [www.academicmaps.blogspot.com](http://www.academicmaps.blogspot.com) with its discussions of recent research and solutions to customer service issues is very popular and read by over 2,000 colleges, universities and business that work with academia each week.

Raisman has a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in neurolinguistics, was a Fulbright Fellow in France, has published five books and over 300 articles.

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# **The State of Academic Customer Service on U.S. Campuses**

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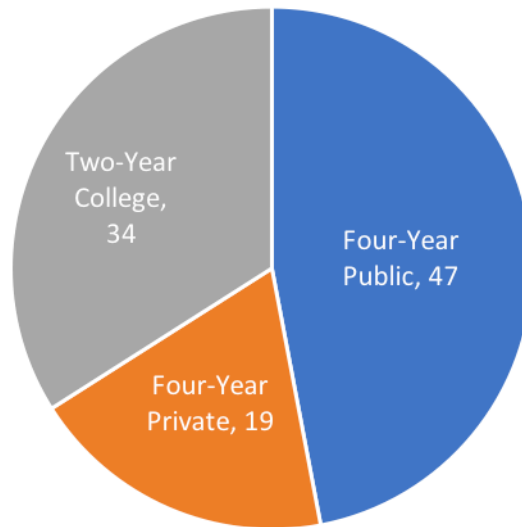
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## Introduction

A survey on the state of academic customer service for students found that academic customer service provided on the nation's campuses is fair or weak at best and is a cause of many students leaving a college. Basic service functions such as training, telephone skills, and returning voice mails and emails are rudimentary service functions that are rated low. This is not a good recognition considering the importance of providing good to excellent academic customer service to retaining students and revenue.

In 2016, N.Raisman and Associates emailed a survey to 1,000 potential respondents determine the state of academic customer service on the campuses of community colleges, and public and private universities. The survey was returned by 445 respondents with distribution as shown in the chart below.

*Exhibit 1. Distribution of survey respondents by institution type.*



Respondents were asked to rate customer service on their campuses according to their observations on concerns such as *We provide our students with great customer service* and specific customer service performance functions like *Our Employees will interrupt what they are doing to help a student* or *Voicemails are returned within 24 hours of receipt*. There were also questions to determine if there is a real commitment to customer service such as *Administrators have had training in academic customer service so they know how to provide excellent service to students* and *We have campus-wide agreement towards building a college focused on providing excellent customer service*.

For this survey, academic customer service was defined as meeting the needs and expectations of students in the services, processes, and physical aspects of a college as they navigate the institution. These services include all aspects of the student experience including business functions; interactions with faculty, staff and administrators; the classroom experience; and even the website and other aspects of “college.” It is not coddling the students nor buying into the adage that “the customer is always right.” Nor is it about inflating grades. It is about engaging students by providing high-quality services that make it easier for them to succeed as well as feel welcomed and fully-valued. Academic customer service makes the student the absolute center of the college and how it interacts with them assures that.

It has been found that academic customer service on a campus can account for up to 78 percent of why students leave. This survey is to determine the levels of academic customer service we provide on our campuses across the country so we can better serve and retain students.

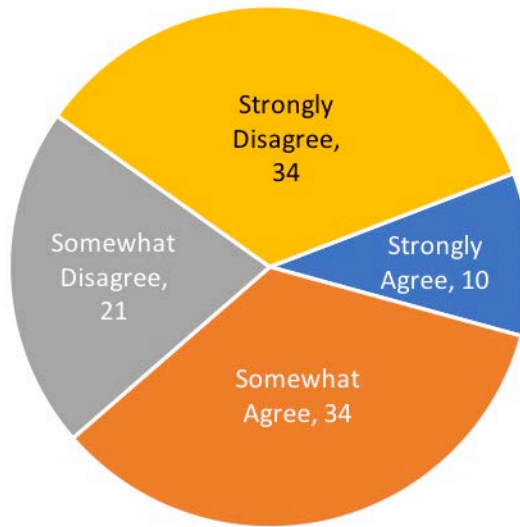
## **The Results**

The survey results were mixed not by type of institution so much but by the responses of the different employee groups on campuses (i.e., presidents, administrators, faculty and staff). College presidents and senior administrators gave the highest ratings for the service provided on campus but the people who meet with students every day had quite different estimations of service to students and rated it fair to even poor. Faculty were small in number of respondents but indicated that they thought customer service was fair and could be better though in the comments there were a couple of predictable statements that customer service is not a topic for colleges in any case. “We aren’t business after all.”

Seventy-five percent of presidents and senior administrators somewhat agreed that the *We provide our students with great customer service* on their campuses. It is interesting that only 14 percent strongly agreed that they provide great customer service while 11 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the college provided students with great customer service. Even the group that rated the service best on campuses did not have rate their service extremely high. These responses though higher than those from other employee groups were not a ringing endorsement of customer service to students.

Administrators had a very different view of the service provided to students. They rated it much lower than did the presidents and senior administrators. Only 10 percent felt that their school provided great service while 55 percent disagreed that the schools provided great service to students. This is a rather strong difference of evaluation between the senior administrators and the people who carry out school policy and oversee the service provided every day.

*Exhibit 2. Distribution of survey respondents by “We provide our students with great customer service.” (N=29)*



It is interesting that this variance exists but it is also predictable depending on the levels of contacts with student presidents and senior administrators are on a regular basis. In our work with colleges and universities we have found that the relative isolation from students versus the direct contact provides a very different exposure to the actual customer service students receive. Those on the front-line working with students on a daily basis hear the complaints and even observe weak or poor service in their day-to-day work. They are the ones who are called upon to provide the customer service but are often frustrated in their work as we have seen while conducting academic customer service studies on campuses. The administrators and managers must monitor the staff and others in how they provide customer service to students. The survey results suggest that they do not seem to observe great service being provided and what they are seeing is not making them feel very positive about that service.

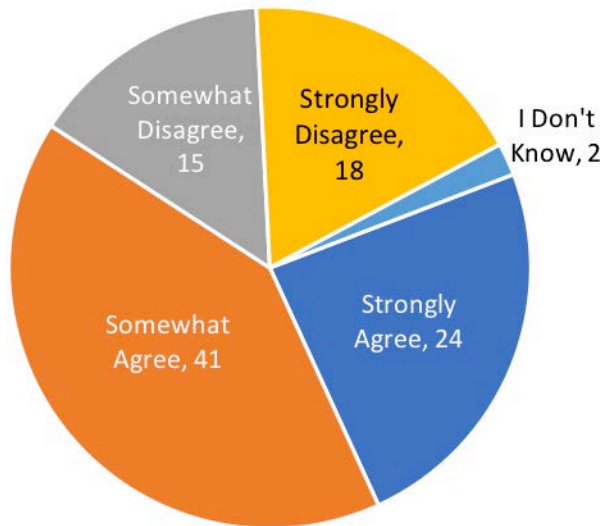
This variance held true through the entire survey except on questions such as *Providing students with great academic customer service is important*. There was near unanimous agreement from staff and administrators that this was very important. Even faculty who



usually recoil at the notion of customer service felt it was important. The only disagreement came from presidents and senior administrators where 83 percent felt it was highly important but 9 percent said they either disagreed somewhat, or disagreed strongly (2 percent) that customer service on campus was important. This was admittedly a surprise considering how significant academic customer service is to retention and enrollment.

Good academic customer service can provide a college with a strong competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining students. High Point University has clearly shown this. Moreover, there are other benefits from providing strong academic customer service such having the revenue to generate new programs and faculty from the increased revenue from retention numbers going up. The responses to the item of *Our customer service on campus is one of our strongest competitive advantages* was very mixed with a third of respondents feeling that it was not on their campus.

*Exhibit 3. Distribution of survey respondents by “Our customer service on campus is one of our strongest competitive advantages.”*



On this issue, 17 percent of senior administrators and presidents felt that it was not a competitive advantage on their campuses. Sixty-one percent of administrators indicated that academic customer service was not a competitive advantage. This again shows the variance between senior administrators and those who carry out the day-to-day contact with students. Staff indicated that 21 percent did not feel that it was a competitive advantage. Considering that 76% of students indicated that weak to poor customer service was the reason they left a college this indicates room for colleges to increase their



retention and enrollment by increasing academic customer service on campus until it is a competitive advantage.

One reason why there is a variance between groups on campus lies beyond their daily contact with students and has to do with colleges not making customer service a consistent concept on campus. In response to the issue of *We have campus-wide agreement towards building a college focused on providing excellent customer service*, overall there was 57 percent agreement with the statement but there were also 39 percent who disagreed. The 57 percent is a good indicator that there is concern for customer service on campus but in our work improving customer service on campuses, we discovered that very few of the schools had a written statement pertaining to academic customer service. Only one had a customer service mission statement to guide the delivery of service on campus.<sup>1</sup>

There was also a variance between the front-line providers of service and the senior administrators. Seventy percent of the senior administrators felt that there was agreement on the customer service mission of the school while 30 percent did not. But 76 percent of administrators felt there was no a campus-wide agreement. Staff were not as strong in their feeling that there was no agreement (56 percent) but they too disagreed with the senior administration.

It becomes clear that one reason why there is not the level of customer service that is needed to retain more students is that there is no agreement as to what it is and how to provide it on campuses. It is important that colleges have a clear and published academic customer service mission statement if they are to have good service for students on campus. Another aspect of the weak agreement is that there does not appear to really be an investment in good to excellent customer service. This can be seen in the responses to the questions of training for all of the groups.

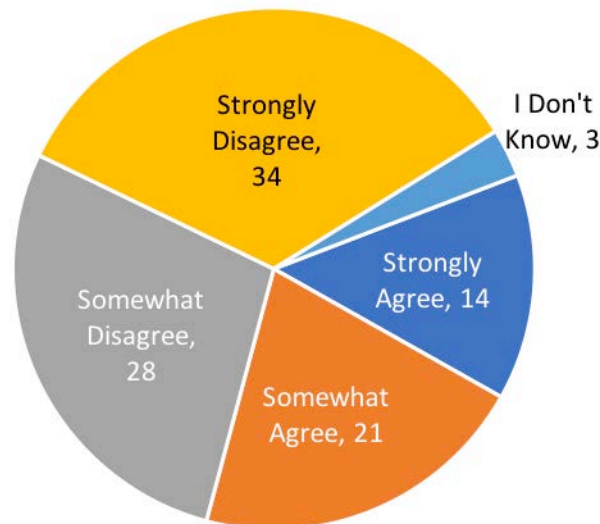
Staff who are charged with most of the delivery of customer service are the most in need of training but 55 percent of them said that they disagreed with the statement that *Staff have had training in academic customer service so they know how to provide excellent customer service in their interactions with students*. Four percent also said they did not know if they had training which means that they did not or the training was so nebulous that they do not realize they had some.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://academicmaps.blogspot.com/2016/01/creating-service-missionvision-for-your.html>.

Training of staff is paramount to providing good to excellent customer service so with so many of them saying they have not had training in it, it is no wonder that there is such a low level of service delivery as observed by their managers. The administrators indicated that they had even less training than staff.

*Exhibit 4. Distribution of survey respondents by “Administrators have had training in academic customer service so they know how to provide excellent service to students.”*



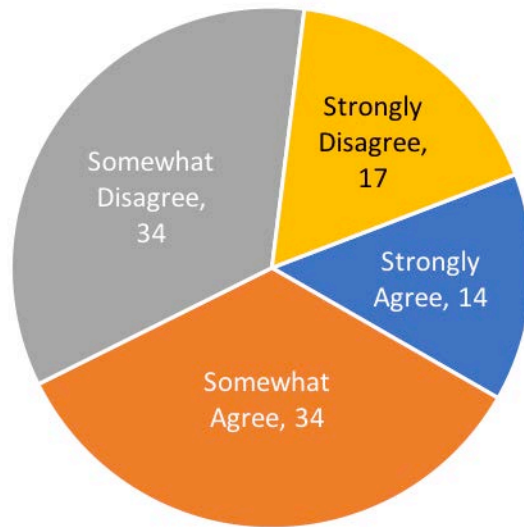
Sixty-two percent of administrators indicated that they had received no training with another 3 percent saying they did not know which means that they did not or they would have known. These are the people charged with making sure that good customer service has been delivered yet they felt that they were not given the training and the tools to be able to do so. Once again, 67 percent of the senior administrators were of the belief that there had been training of administrators and staff (62 percent). This variance we have found in our work comes about because the senior administrators believe that the managers and administrators who supervise staff would provide training to the staff. But how can they when they themselves have not had any?

Training is of paramount importance in delivering good customer service on a campus. If people do not know what academic customer service is and what it entails, they cannot deliver it to students. If they do not know how to deliver it, they are less likely to provide it. People must be taught, especially on college campuses which have not historically been interested in customer service, to deliver good to excellent service to keep students at the college. This is an investment colleges can and should make that will pay off in retention

and enrollment dividends which then lead to increased revenue and funds to meet the mission.

When it comes to the functions of good customer service, such as *Employees will interrupt what they are doing to help a student*, senior administrators and staff felt that they would do so (senior administrators, 80 percent; staff, 92 percent) while administrators were much less optimistic with 52 percent assessing that employees (staff for the most part) would not interrupt their work to help a student.

*Exhibit 5. Distribution of survey respondents by “Our employees will interrupt what they are doing to help a student.”*



When it comes to basic customer service delivery such as answering phones, responding to emails and voice messages, all three sectors felt that they did not do a good job. These are basic aspects of delivering customer service to students and others coming into contact with the college, yet they do not appear to be done well at all. Even 53 percent of the usually optimistic senior administrators said answering the telephone in four rings or less was not something that was accomplished. Seventy percent of administrators and 52 percent of staff agreed even though they are most often the ones charged with answering the phones.

Voice and email mail was not responded to by the end of the day according to all groups. Fifty-eight percent of senior administrators, 87 percent of administrators, and 54 percent of staff said voicemails and emails were not returned promptly. This again is a basic

customer service indicator that colleges are failing at, raising questions about how well colleges are really delivering customer service to students and others.

One of the services that schools should be providing is the availability of faculty for extra help in office hours and advisers who are up-to-date on the curriculum and schedule. These are two areas that are considered fairly good by all groups but not as strongly as they should be. Fifty-one percent of senior administrators and staff felt that advisers are up-to-date on curriculum and the schedule. This is a fair rating but not where students would expect advisers to be in knowing the curriculum and schedule. Moreover, this percentage is challenged by administrators who have to deal with the results of advisers not being up-to-date. They rated the advisors as not current by 59 percent. In our work in customer service on college and universities we are finding that too many advisers are not up-to-date and they are misadvising students making them prolong their stay often for another year to make up for weak or poor advisor. It is incumbent on schools to make certain that all advisers are up-to-date on curriculum and schedule.

All three groups felt that faculty were available for extra help for students when needed. This is a definite plus in the service department. They were not as strong in their assessment as they should be in this most important area but they were on the plus side with senior administrators (57 percent), administrators (47 percent) and staff (55 percent). This is another basic expectation service students have and need. Faculty should be available to students when they need extra help. They appear to be somewhat available but this should be an area in which the responses are in the 90 percent range that agree with the statement *Faculty are available for extra help when students need it.*

When it comes to assistance and lack of wait time at three key service points for students, registrar, bursar, and financial aid office, the ratings overall are fair with the registrar's office being rated as good by 54 percent, the bursar by 52 percent, and financial aid by 54 percent. These numbers are propped up to a large extent by the responses of senior administrators but it needs to be recognized that changes in on-line service delivery have cut lines and provided service on demand. One respondents stated that on-line services have sped up the services lessening wait time and delivery of service in all three offices. The only office that both administrators (58 percent) and staff (61 percent) felt was not as fast to get service at was the financial aid office. This would be in line with the observation that on-line services help reduce lines at the other offices because financial aid is the least technologically provided. Moreover, financial aid needs more time with

many students thereby tying up staff and professionals who cannot wait on others while busy with a student.

The three issues on which there was unanimity were *Facilities are well maintained and attractive*, *Our graduation rate is where it should be*, and *Our retention rate (fall-to-fall) is where it should be*. Well maintained facilities affect students positively and can incline them favorably toward the school. Not one group was pleased with the college's graduation rate nor the fall-to-fall retention rate.

Is not at all surprising that colleges are not happy with their retention rates. With the average graduation rate hovering around 50 percent nationally, schools are losing too many students. Weak academic customer service is driving students away in large numbers. However, these two issues on retention and graduation rates can be positively improved if colleges attend to the basics of academic customer service, provide high-quality training, and make certain that people are delivering good to excellent academic customer service as indicated in the survey results.

## **Conclusion**

The state of academic customer service delivered to students is weak at best having negative effects on enrollment, retention, and by reflection—revenue. Though it has been recognized that weak or poor customer service is a major contributor to attrition rates on college campuses, most schools are not doing enough to improve the delivery of their services. Part of the problem is that there is a disconnect between the people who are charged to carry out the delivery of services (administrators, managers, and staff) and the senior administration. Senior administrators appear to assume that students are getting good service but those on the front lines know otherwise.

Very few if any schools are satisfied with their retention and graduation rates yet very few appear to be working on solving one root cause (i.e., academic customer service). Though there is an assumption among senior administrators for example that training is taking place, for the most part it is not. Without training, staff and administrators will not know how to best provide great service or what is expected of them.

Colleges and universities also need to make customer service more of a priority considering its impact on retention. They need to invest in making customer service to

students a priority on campus through developing a customer service mission statement, training, and accountability.



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