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Leveraging Service Blueprinting to Rethink Higher Education

When Students Become 'Valued Customers,' Everybody Wins

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Introduction and summary

There is much discussion today about the need to transform higher education. Experts and researchers list numerous challenges: low student retention and graduation rates, the increasing cost of higher education, and concerns that graduates don't possess the skills required to compete successfully in today's interconnected, global marketplace. Less than 60 percent of students who enter four-year institutions in the United States earn a degree within six years and the graduation rate at many institutions is much lower than that.¹

Nontraditional students,² who currently outnumber traditional undergraduate students, can face significant structural barriers to degree completion that can cost them additional time and money during their pursuit of a degree.³ In fact, college can be a financial burden for all types of students. Those graduating in 2009 had, on average, student loan debt totaling \$24,000.⁴

Although recent research provides evidence of the positive outcomes, financial and otherwise, that come from earning a college degree, other evidence suggests that a substantial number of students are not making sufficient gains in fundamental skills such as critical thinking and written communication while in college.⁵ Further, some of the cross-disciplinary skills and knowledge demanded in today's economy are often missing in traditional, discipline-based degree programs. This may leave many students who do complete degrees without the skills necessary to compete successfully for jobs upon graduation and in the future.

These are just a few of the issues facing higher education that point to the need for new thinking and innovative approaches. Although advances in technology and online learning have the potential to help address some of these concerns and challenges, technology itself is not the answer. Technology is just one component in the needed service system redesign effort—public policy must also be reshaped. We believe a key to the solution to many of the issues lies in designing and delivering student-focused educational experiences that meet their needs and desired outcomes while concurrently considering the needs of other stakeholders such as employers, government, and society more broadly.

In this paper we take the position that higher education is a service, or a service system, and that transformative initiatives aiming to address the types of problems noted earlier will benefit from viewing them through a service lens.⁶ A service lens puts the customer at the center of improvement and innovation initiatives, considers the customer experience to be a foundation for analyzing and making enhancements, and assumes the customer is a co-creator of value.⁷

In the context of higher education, this means that the student is the center, the student's experience is the foundation for analysis, and the student is a co-creator of his or her educational experience and ultimately the value received. Although we are not the first to discuss higher education from this perspective,⁸ we believe there are many benefits that could accrue from such a perspective being more widely adopted and implemented within higher education. Viewing students as customers has a charged history in higher education but as the economy has become more service dominant, it can be beneficial to use what we have learned studying other services to help improve higher education.

By approaching higher education through a service lens, using service management and service science perspectives, we argue that higher education improvements and innovations should be driven by focusing on students as customers. In doing so, the student experience becomes the central focus upon which the structure, capabilities, and resources of higher education institutions are brought to bear and aligned. This is a significant shift, as it takes us from the idea of students navigating an often complex and fragmented higher education system to the idea of the higher education system being integrated and aligned to deliver the best experience for its students.

Although we acknowledge higher education has many customers and stakeholders (future employers, government, society),⁹ given students' position as the focus of the service and the target of the transformation through knowledge acquisition, students need to be at the core of higher education reform. To move in this direction, tools and techniques shown to facilitate customer-focused improvement and innovation should be applied in higher education in order to successfully develop and implement positive change in the student experience and outcomes.

We focus on one specific technique, service blueprinting, which facilitates collaboration among key contributors and stakeholders involved across a broad customer experience to create a visual depiction, or blueprint, of a service. The service blueprint highlights the steps in the process, the points of contact that take place, and

the physical evidence that exists from the customer's point of view. Whether the technique is being used to examine existing services or to develop new ones, the discussions that occur during blueprinting have the potential to improve services or conceptualize services in important ways. In the paper we introduce the philosophy that underlies service blueprinting and then describe the technique itself and how it has been used in practice.

We believe service blueprinting can help university leaders and employees redesign, reinvent, and reimagine their educational offerings and service processes from the student's point of view. There are many grant-funded initiatives focused on improving higher education but it is important to ask whether the changes proposed will improve or worsen the student experience and outcomes. Do the changes eliminate current "pain points," which are moments during the service that customers or university employees perceive to be annoying, challenging, or dissatisfying, or do they create new ones? Do the changes lead to innovative and sustainable educational models or just reinforce the existing ones? Do multiple initiatives work at cross-purposes and not align with the student experience? Could further discussion and insights with stakeholders help improve how the problems and proposed changes are conceptualized or implemented?

Our intent with this paper is not to provide specific solutions to the problems facing higher education today but rather to spotlight an easy-to-use yet powerful technique that has the ability to help examine, improve, innovate, and transform higher education. Although we believe the technique can be useful to all types of educational institutions, in this paper we focus specifically on four-year public institutions of higher education in the United States. We provide two case studies that highlight how blueprinting can be used to improve and redesign services.

The first focuses on using blueprinting to redesign a course from a traditional face-to-face format to an online/hybrid format in order to reduce or eliminate student pain points and improve student outcomes. The second case study shows how blueprinting could be used to examine and identify problem areas related to the financial aid process with the goal of then finding ways to enhance the experience for students. In addition, we provide a series of examples of how service blueprinting could be used to help public higher education institutions successfully improve and innovate their service offerings and processes from the student perspective.

A number of recommendations for both state and federal policymakers flow from examining higher education through a service lens and from the service blueprint-

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ing philosophy and technique. At the state level, policymakers could use service blueprinting to advance the following policy initiatives, among others:

- **Facilitate statewide policy development and best practice sharing within and across universities.** Service blueprinting could be used to share best practices and develop process improvements around critical student experiences such as advising and credit transfer.
- **Online graduation maps for every student.** Blueprinting the student experience from application to graduation could serve as the basis for developing an online planning tool or graduation map. The map could help students track their progress toward graduation and provide easy access to information that could help them in their pursuit of a degree.

At the federal level, policymakers could promote service blueprinting through policy initiatives such as:

- **Competitive grants to promote innovation.** Federally funded, innovative service blueprinting projects could identify best practices for a host of university service offerings such as financial aid, faculty advising, and online learning.
- **A research agency for education policy.** The Department of Education could create an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Education, or ARPA-ED, that would serve as a repository of research findings and best practices for implementing innovative higher education policies, including useful innovation techniques such as service blueprinting.
- **An internal service blueprint of federal outreach efforts.** Service blueprinting could be used to examine the federal government's outreach efforts to make sure they meet the needs of students and families. It could also be used to make sure the ARPA-ED's research findings are accessible to students, researchers, and policymakers.
- **Link federal financial aid to student-focused performance measurements.** Federal policymakers could shift financial incentives away from focusing solely on student enrollment to rewarding universities for reducing student problem areas that hinder graduation and for student completion. Service blueprinting could be used to identify issues that arise during the educational process that impede graduation.

- **Exit interviews of degree-seeking students who leave school without a degree.**

Exit interviews with students who withdraw could be required for full payment of a student's Pell Grant and used to identify student problem areas. Having a standard exit interview template across universities would enable comparability of the findings. Frequently identified problem areas for students could be the focus of service blueprinting efforts to reduce or eliminate them as part of the student experience.

- **Improve accreditation standards for schools by including service blueprinting as a required institutional practice.**

Accrediting agencies could be required to examine institutional blueprints as part of the accreditation process. Examining blueprints, along with students' perceptions of service quality and measures of student satisfaction, can help accrediting agencies promote greater institutional quality for students.

Public policy influences all aspects of higher education. Therefore, policy decisions should be examined based on the effect they will have on all key stakeholders including students at the core. To get a complete perspective, we believe it is important for policymakers at the state and federal levels to employ and integrate various techniques and tools. To understand the student perspective, we encourage public policymakers to embrace a service lens and service innovation techniques such as service blueprinting as they can lead to important innovations in higher education that might otherwise be overlooked.

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