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OPINION

It's time for colleges to undergo a major attitude shift in how they treat students | Opinion

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By [Guest Editorial](#)

By James MacLaren

For decades, colleges and universities have operated under a model where students serve the institution. In return for that service, colleges bestow upon them a series of credentials that signal to employers core sets of skills that will make them a valuable asset to any company. But as we navigate the challenges of the 21st century, this paradigm must change. It is time for institutions of higher learning to undergo a fundamental shift—from seeing students as mere participants in their education to recognizing them as customers who deserve excellence in service.

Referring to students as our “customers” may seem foreign or even uncomfortable to some in academia. Traditionally, we prefer to call them “students” or “learners,” which describes these individuals accurately, but also creates an inherent power dynamic. Students and learners need to learn—the onus is on them to do so. Customers must be served—the onus is on us, education leaders, to do so.

Adopting the term “customer” is not about diminishing the value of education or commercializing the academic experience. Instead, it is about aligning our mindset with the realities of today’s world. Students and their families invest enormous amounts of money, time and emotional energy into choosing and attending college. They do so with the expectation that their chosen institution will help them achieve their goals and dreams. As such, it is our responsibility to meet those expectations with the highest standards of service.

At Lebanon Valley College, we are embarking on a journey to embed service excellence into the very fabric of our institution. Our program that we have unveiled at LVC is named “A.S.P.I.R.E.”



A.S.P.I.R.E. is a set of service standards shaped by our core values for how all LVC employees perform to provide a legendary customer service experience.

The “A” in ASPIRE starts with accountability to our mission, vision and values. Without institutional accountability, service excellence is just a good idea and never actually impacts the foundation of any institution. The “S” is for student-centered decision-making. The “P” is for professional engagement from our staff and faculty. Inclusivity is “I” which signals that all members of our community and visitors to campus are treated with dignity. A respectful approach accounts for the “R” and the “E” is empowerment. We as an institution must do what we can to help our faculty and staff make decisions that help our students.

This journey is not merely about improving customer service in isolated pockets of the college; it is about a holistic transformation where every office, division and employee is committed to seeing the college experience through the eyes of those we serve. To the families we serve, we are not a collection of separate offices and departments—we are one institution. When one part fails, trust in the entire institution can erode. The negative word-of-mouth brought about by confusing tuition bills, consistently poor meal quality, unreturned phone calls, or multi-week delays in grading student coursework renders null an institution’s investments in advertising, recruitment, and retention.

Service excellence is about more than just avoiding mistakes; it’s about actively creating positive, memorable experiences. This includes everything from the warmth and competence of our interactions to the impeccable maintenance of our grounds and facilities. These elements invoke emotional responses and communicate how we treat our customers, directly impacting their decisions to enroll and stick with us. Legendary customer service can be as simple as walking with a student to the office they’re trying to find instead of simply giving directions.

We must also become adept at service recovery, turning negative experiences into positive narratives that reinforce trust and commitment. And this change must start at the top. I have asked my cabinet to embody the principles of service excellence, fostering a culture of accountability, optimism and continuous improvement. We must communicate our expectations clearly, follow through on our promises and model problem-solving rather than blame.

Service excellence is not an optional add-on to the academic experience; it is a non-negotiable core value that must be infused into our culture. The success of our institutions—and the success of our students—depends on it. Let us lead the charge in transforming higher education, ensuring that every student is not just a participant in our institutions, but a valued customer whose dreams and aspirations we are dedicated to fulfilling.

By embracing the term “customer” and the mindset that accompanies it, we can create an environment where service excellence is not just a goal, but a reality that defines the experience of every student who walks through our doors. Let us commit to this change, and in doing so, ensure that our institutions are truly serving the needs of those we exist to support.

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