

GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER  
LEARNING

By

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B.G.S., Kansas University, 1976  
M.S., University of North Dakota, 1983  
B.S., Southwestern College, 2003

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2011

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this basic interpretative qualitative study was to discover and understand graduates' perceptions of customer service from their chosen college or university. How graduates perceive customer service of institutions of higher learning may induce some educational institutions to pursue continuous improvement and performance excellence. Graduates from the master's level or higher have spent more than the average time in the educational setting compared to undergraduates or bachelor's level students and are more likely to have greater awareness concerning the customer service attributes. These perceptions could give rise to process improvement techniques and programs that would be useful for a variety of institutions. The method used to acquire the data was interviewing individuals who had completed at least their master's degree. The results of these interviews were analyzed by consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what the interviewees had to say and what the researcher discovered. Triangulation through reflection and field notes was utilized to ensure credibility of findings.

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### **Dedication**

The culmination of many years of study in the form of this dissertation is dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Everett L. Walters. They both showed me that I could accomplish whatever I set my heart on, and each one set the example by completing advanced degrees earlier in their lives. Both are an inspiration to me: my father because he believed in me and often said that I had so much more of “whatever it takes” than he had and if he could do it, he was sure I could make it as well; my mother because she was steadfast and showed me that perseverance is ultimately rewarded in the end. Thank you for believing in me, encouraging me, and never doubting that this work which was so long in coming would eventually be completed. I also dedicate this research to my bride, Barbara Walters, for her sacrifice and continual support in multiple ways and for her faith in me to finish the task. I thank my children and their families for their patience while I spent many hours away focused on this study instead of spending time with them. I intend to make that up. A hearty thanks goes to my major professor Dr. Spikes for his help in seeing me through this process. I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the tremendous support I received from Sandy Evans who works tirelessly and often behind the scenes. There are many others who influenced me positively while I worked on this doctorate of education. You may not even know how your smile, your words of encouragement, your support, your prayers affected my life; I count you as friends.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Quality experts believe that, ‘measuring customer satisfaction at an educational establishment might be regarded by educators as one of the greatest challenges of the quality movement’” (Cloutier & Richards as cited in Quinn, Lemay, Larsen, and Johnson, 2009, p. 139).

Many colleges and universities have been striving to find the means to improve customer satisfaction and performance measurements for their organization, particularly in regard to how they relate to their key customers, represented by the graduates interviewed in this study. As Sahney, Banwet, and Karunes (2007) stated, “In response to growing concerns from stakeholders about poor or inconsistent quality, institutions of higher education are increasingly realizing the significance of customer centered philosophies and thereby, seeking ways to improve and provide better customer service” (p. 266). This study sought to understand how -- from a graduate’s perspective -- customer service impacted his/her experience in the chosen institution. In addition, this research sought to determine if there was any correlation between performance excellence and customer service strategies. Was the customer service provided to the graduate able to meet his/her needs or desires? How aware were graduate students of the customer service provided to them from their chosen institution prior to their advanced coursework, compared to their awareness after graduation?

Does the desire to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction drive institutions toward other goals such as continuous improvement or performance excellence standards or some type of self assessment? The focus of this study was on customer service and how graduates perceived this. Nevertheless, the impact of customer service could be driven from a performance improvement program. According to Bolton and Drew (1991) “many companies have

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implemented quality measurement programs in an attempt to relate customer evaluations of quality to service attributes” (p. 1). They go on to report within the realm of customer service that:

Researchers distinguish between two constructs, customer satisfaction and attitude.

Customer satisfaction refers to a customer's evaluation of a specific transaction. In

contrast, a customer's attitude corresponds to a global evaluation of the product/service,

rather than to an evaluation of a specific transaction. (1991, p. 2)

Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997) also substantiated that “Customer satisfaction with a company’s products or services is often seen as the key to a company’s success and long-term competitiveness” (p. 737). Perhaps a study of graduate perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning could have revealed characteristics or attributes of meeting the needs of the universities’ customers. Therefore, the focus of this research was graduate perceptions of customer service and performance excellence.

Effectiveness and efficiency, particularly performance excellence, are focused on attaining superior results based on a systems-wide culture of continuous improvement. National criteria for self evaluation were created by an act of Congress in 1987 and have been continually updated since. The National Institute of Standards and Technology, an arm of the Department of Commerce, has oversight of this criterion. The program to manage this criterion is called the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2010a).

The Baldrige Program is the nation's public-private partnership dedicated to performance excellence. The Baldrige Program raises awareness about the importance of performance excellence in driving the U.S. and global economy, provides organizational assessment tools and criteria, educates leaders in businesses, schools, health care organizations, and

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government and nonprofit agencies about the practices of best-in-class organizations, and recognizes national role models and honors them with the only Presidential Award for performance excellence. (para. 1)

The Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, a set of standards for education from the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2011-2012), offers colleges and universities a set of criteria that can lead them toward their own success formula. This claim is based on the criteria being about “students excelling! Because they are about survival and sustainability in your market with a high-performing, high-integrity organization” (p. i). What is unique when comparing Baldrige criteria to other forms of process improvement programs or methodologies is that “Baldrige Performance Criteria serve as a comprehensive framework for performance excellence” (2010b, para. 4). The value of applying for the Baldrige is that it is “the leading edge of validated management practice” (2010c, para. 3)

The regional and specialized/professional accreditation process in the United States has been designed to ensure the highest standards in institutions of higher learning. The American Psychological Association (2008) stated that accreditation “encourages improvement through continuous self-study and review. It fosters excellence in postsecondary education through the development of principles and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness” (para. 1). Other organizations such as Great Lakes University (2010) have validated that “accreditation is a measure of quality control” (para. 6).

Nevertheless, the right mix of customer satisfaction measurements or attributes for colleges and universities has been elusive and it has been difficult to find one prescription that fits all. Pande, Neuman, and Cavanagh (2000) stated, “Depending on your purpose, measures can be easy, or a major effort. The long term development of a measurement ‘infrastructure’

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however, is a key building block for a full organizational (*performance excellence*) system” (p. 197). They went on to explain, “The huge benefit is an ability to monitor and respond to change in a way that few organizations can lay claim to today” (p. 197).

However, there are enough commonalities that each organization can learn from others and from their primary measurements. It is these commonalities that this research sought to uncover from the post-student’s perception, in order to offer a starting point for those who have just begun the journey to assess and improve their chosen college or university. Additionally, these themes could offer those who are well on their way a check point to ensure alignment toward the organization’s stated goals. What remained was to compare the graduates’ needs and perceptions of their experience as students with what the individuals expectations were in customer service and performance excellence. The expectation was that uncovering graduate perceptions of customer service would reveal a gap between needs or expectations and what was actually provided. Conversely, institutions with high levels of customer service would reveal principles useful to others. In turn, the gap that was revealed offered an approach to lead colleges or universities to review their own procedures to increase a positive perception of customer service and, therefore, of their universities (Gilbert, 2008, p. 5).

Another implication of studying graduates’ perceptions could lead to a model of characteristics or attributes of customer service or performance excellence. The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education revealed it is their belief that:

Colleges must better measure the skills and knowledge they impart to students, and openly share that information with the public. And a growing number of college leaders (though not all) also agree that higher education institutions, individually and collectively, must do a better job proving to the public that they are successfully

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educating students — partly because the current political and economic climate demands it, and partly because it's the right thing to do" (Lederman, 2006, para. 1-6).

There appear to be some colleges and universities that successfully embrace the concepts of customer service, performance excellence, and the need to be the best at what their particular niche might be (Bin, 2010). This could lead to the concept of "best-in-class." While it would seem intuitive to understand what best-in-class means, it is commonly interpreted in multiple ways, such as: best practices, listening to the voice of the customer, benchmarking, model organizations, ideal school system and others (Chalker & Haynes, 1996, Sullivan & Associates, 2003, Meister, 1998). The phrase best-in-class has often been used as a general term for a high level of competitive performance and a set of best practices. Additionally, best-in-class organizations have often been recognized as having outstanding processes which have been vital to their business, and representative of what to seek in other organizations, according to the Government Accountability Office (1998). The Bridgefield Group Glossary (2006) defined best practices in this way: "Standard, published operating methods found to produce the best performance and results in a given industry or organization" (para. 28). As the focus of this research was customer service and performance excellence, the search for a link, if one existed, has been underway between what has been discussed and the focus of customer service and performance excellence.

The term best-in-class facilitated in identifying the direction this research was headed; however, this study was more concerned with the desire to uncover those measurements or principles from a student's perspective that helped to propel a college or university toward a standard of excellence that could surpass most other educational institutions in its class. In this sense, this research intended to uncover a set of measurements or attributes that could assist a

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wide variety of colleges, universities, and other institutions of higher education in their pursuit of performance excellence, also peripherally known as continuous process improvement. Dew stated that, “What’s new in higher education is the increased emphasis on continuous quality improvement and the growing appreciation of quality management systems” (2007, p. 48).

Quality management systems are the vehicle that drives an institution towards process excellence, but it has been their measurements that have pointed the way. “What gets measured gets done,” (Williamson, 2006, p.1) has been attributed to management guru Peter Drucker as well as many others.

### **Background**

In *The State of Quality in Higher Education*, Dew (n.d.) listed a myriad of community colleges, as well as private and public universities, that have been focusing on continuous improvement initiatives and the development of strategic quality planning, including measurements for student’s needs and satisfaction. Many of these universities have established Quality Centers that “foster quality related research and provide consulting and public workshops on continuous improvement to corporations, government agencies, and health care providers. Most universities also have faculty who teach quality principles in their academic programs” (Dew, p. 4). Still, many institutions do not see the need to embrace the concept of quality and continuous improvement. Dew writes:

The primary information source in higher education, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, refused to even cover the story about the University of Wisconsin–Stout winning the National Baldrige Award. Few institutions really collect and study comparative outcome data and few have a coherent concept of their management system. The emphasis in most institutions is to collect data that must be reported to state agencies that often seem to do



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little with the data that is collected. Relatively few institutions survey their stakeholders in any systematic manner. (n.d., p. 6)

Graduates are clearly stakeholders as they are the individuals who have a “direct or indirect stake in an organization because they could be affected by the organization’s actions, objectives and policies” (BusinessDictionary, 2009, para. 1).

Furst-Bowe and Mooney, assistant chancellor and associate dean of UW-Stout, in their top ten lessons learned in applying the Baldrige framework, identified the need for “clarity in our student and stakeholder requirements” (2002, p. 34). In addition, sufficient evidence exists to suggest there has been great value in analyzing comparative data, fostering quality principles, and focusing on strategic planning and leadership to increase appeal to the primary stakeholder, the student.

This research was not seeking which types of accreditation are available for the various colleges and universities across America and around the world, but it does acknowledge the value and importance of accreditation in beginning the process of establishing key performance measurements and ensuring quality education. This research has only intended to review accreditation as a platform for schools and programs to grow and continue to reach for their full potential. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) reports:

Accreditation is the primary means of assuring and improving the quality of higher education institutions and programs in the United States. Active for the past 100 years, this private, voluntary system of self examination and peer review has been central to the creation of a U.S. higher education enterprise that is outstanding in many respects. (2006, p. 1)

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Would the process of researching this platform and building on its precepts be beneficial in the search for meeting students'/graduates' needs and determining their perceptions of customer service? At least one accreditation agency seemed to tie this together. The American Council for Business Schools and Programs (2011) used Baldrige-type criteria as their accreditation tool and specifically asked how an organization "determined their student and stakeholder satisfaction" (para. 2, Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012. p. 13). This, in turn, would be helpful for institutions who are seeking to continuously improve not only their methods of teaching, but all aspects of their performance excellence methodology. Accreditation organizations provide two major types of accreditation: institutional accreditation and specialized accreditation. Institutional accreditation is awarded to a college or university that has met the standards of the accrediting body. Specialized accreditation for professional courses or programs is a type of accreditation for sub-sets of colleges or universities that have already achieved overall accreditation for major areas, but wish to have their colleges or individual programs accredited as well (MSN Encarta, 2007, sect. 3). Accreditation offers students a certain standard and comes with the promises of a quality education, certain federal financial aid, the ability to transfer credits, and assurances of private sector confidence (CHEA, 2006).

While accreditation is the primary form of ensuring that colleges and universities provide quality education, there is more to good business, education-wise, than being accredited. There have been many educational institutions that have joined businesses around the world to become effective and efficient and become a model of best practices. Universities pride themselves on standing out in one way or another. Some methods of increasing their reputation have included having the most national merit scholars, the most national science fellows, the greatest endowment per student, or the amount of their contribution to research (Rice University -

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Definition, 2010, para. 1 – 3). Maguad (2007) wrote about identifying the needs of customers in higher education and informed us that the user-based definition

...says that if the customer is satisfied, the product has good quality. It is based on the presumption that quality is determined by what a customer wants. This leads to a definition of quality which is fitness for intended use or how well the product performs its intended function. (para. 1)

Juran (1992) also used the term “fitness for use” as his choice for a definition of quality and meeting the customer’s needs (p. 9). In addition, he (1992) chose to define a customer as “anyone who is impacted by the product or process. Customers may be internal or external” (p. 8). However, Maguad (2007) also informed us of difficulty in using terms like “customers” in higher education as he wrote:

Many faculty members feel threatened by the notion that students are customers of the educational process. The idea that students (customers) are partners in developing and delivering quality education (the product or service) threatens the historic, traditional academic role of faculty as purveyor of knowledge. All too often this perspective is reinforced by administrative actions that tend to put the benefits of the institution before the needs of the student body. (para. 3)

In September, 2007, a search of the ERIC (Education Resource Information Center) database on “student-centered” measurements yielded zero returns. A search of “student-oriented measurements” was used to seek different results. Indeed, an article on a teachers’ workshop did come up. However the focus of this research was to find students’ perceptions of customer service from institutions of higher learning. This meant looking at how graduates described measurements, indicators or other attributes that would relate how they viewed their selected

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higher educational institutions. In addition, researching those attributes, measurements or indicators could provide listings or models which could be translated into actionable data to increase the satisfaction of the student body. The question remained, “Why are viable student-centered measurements difficult to identify?” Literature abounds with information on the importance of service to the “customer” and “customer-service measurements” in a business/manufacturing environment. Is it too great a leap to obtain similar data in the educational field?

Perhaps a question about this research could be “Why were graduates instead of students interviewed?” Sirvanci (1996) has told us that “The knowledge and skills that students gain in a course has a value-added effect, and students’ true appreciation is delayed until later in life” (p. 101). In other words, while students are working to produce the requirements for the course they are attending, they typically do not appreciate this labor and the resulting rewards until later in life. Another question might be “Are graduates actual customers of the educational system?” Sirvanci (1996) has also told us, “It is generally assumed that students are the customers of the institutions they attend” (p. 99). Wallace (1999) concurred when he wrote about Southern Polytechnic State University, “there is general agreement among the faculty and staff that the student is the university’s primary customer” (p. 48). This research has acknowledged that the concept of the student/graduate as a customer has not been recognized without debate. A recent article by Eagle and Brennan (2007) informed us that:

The debate is polarized, with advocates regarding it as self-evident that students are customers and should be treated as such, while critics regard it as self-evident that the incursion of the ‘customer’ concept into higher education degrades educational standards and damages educator/student relationships. (p. 44)

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The implications of how the student or former student has been perceived carry certain ramifications. Eagle and Brennan (2007) have gone on to explain:

Ways are recommended in which the careful adoption of the term ‘customers’ to refer to students could retain positive aspects – promoting the legitimate interests of students in the higher education system – while avoiding such potentially negative aspects as the problematic idea that ‘the customer is always right’. (p. 44)

As this research reviewed the perceptions of graduates’ views on customer service and the associated attributes for educational organizations, it was apparent that there was a need for a common language in order to create a clearer picture of what was discussed. Having looked at the performance excellence of various universities and colleges, it quickly became clear that there were many terms to describe similar processes. For the purpose of this research, the term “performance excellence” was used to articulate a means of selecting a strategy to monitor an organization’s progress in attaining their goals in respect to student desires and needs. While this study reviewed graduate perceptions, it was understood that they were students at one time. The graduates’ current perception while reflecting back before and after their advanced degree was what this research wished to delve into deeper.

The performance measurements that any educational institution, or any organization for that matter, chooses should be a balance of leading and lagging indicators. As Kaplan and Norton have said, “having a mixture of leading and lagging indicators is vital for motivating and measuring unit performance” (1996, p. 73). In order to establish this reference, lagging indicators have demonstrated the organization’s performance to date, while leading indicators have been appropriate measures that assist in envisioning their future success. Leading indicators have been harder to establish since they have been predictors of future events. Additionally, most

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indicators on an organization's balanced scorecard have been higher-level indicators with one or more sub-levels of indicators supporting the scorecard that the leadership reviews on a periodic basis. Most commonly, the formal reviews occurred on an annual or monthly basis. However, lower level-- what was usually the more day-to-day operational indicators -- were reviewed on a weekly or daily basis. What this research intended to uncover was student/graduate perceptions of customer service and performance excellence. What did master's level or above graduates consider vital for providing that high level of customer service or performance excellence?

Closely associated with this study for characteristics and attributes of customer service and performance excellence was the exploration of more commonly used indicators for formal annual, monthly and weekly reviews. The goal was to understand from individuals who have completed their education through at least the master's level, what their perception was of customer service and sustaining performance excellence, and how this might impact their educational institutions of choice. An anticipated benefit was to identify commonalities among the attributes and characteristics of customer service and performance excellence that are high-level and useful for assisting leadership in directing their institution toward excellence. Do graduates of higher education offer insights that would assist colleges and universities in moving toward performance excellence?

In reviewing requirements for performance excellence and customer service, Shawyun (2003) emphasized the need for an "integrated performance management model for performance measurement and management for education excellence" (para. 1). Shawyun (2003) went on to state "The key theme is student centered focus and is the approach towards managing quality in education" (para. 2). Deming talked consistently about his simplistic process improvement method which was his Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, the foundation of increasing effectiveness and

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efficiency (Deming, 1986). The cycle, as shown in appendix D, was a basic process improvement cycle since it was designed for continuous improvement and was a simple example of how to systematically improve any process.

While the Deming Cycle has been one of the most fundamental models for improvement, others add to the “how” by specifying the “what” to measure. For instance, the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) offered an approach in measuring outcomes at the university level. Their focus was on “value added” by the institution and whether institutions have clearly defined the customer and the supplier. The CAE saw themselves as the principle focus for adding value and they based their measurements on the difference between what a student knows upon entering and leaving the institution. This research also sought the graduates’ perception of knowledge prior to and after their graduate experience. This study looked for characteristics or attributes the graduates believe may have promoted positive customer service or performance excellence. CAE proposed that institutions focus on a set of common areas or attributes that comprise what has been central to most notions of collegiate education. “We take as our starting point the elements that all higher education institutions share -- namely, that all students, regardless of major or professional ambition, should be proficient in critical thinking, analytic reasoning and written communication skills” (CAE, n.d., para. 32). This in turn has broadened the graduates’ ability to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information. Indeed, more universities have recognized the need for these critical characteristics or skills and have looked for ways to implement them.

It is no secret that we are well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and with the era has come the headlong thrust of technology into the mix of what and how universities teach and train. Whatever or however institutions decide to measure their effectiveness, technology will undoubtedly be a major consideration as institutions seek to compete effectively in the global

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economy. This added dimension permeates all other areas of critical measurement, including customer service and performance excellence. Some institutions add technology directly as a vital measurement.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem that this research investigated was how graduates of higher education perceived customer satisfaction and performance excellence from their former institutions of higher learning. The search for performance excellence and customer service in higher education has been ongoing.

While there has been much literature about the needs of the student, little has existed from a performance excellence standpoint. Even less literature has been available concerning what students need at the graduate program level. Anderson (1976) reported that “One major problem facing almost every college is the formulation of an effective competitive strategy” (p. 361). Anderson (1976) has gone on to quote Doerman (1970) in his article when he asserted, “The competition to enroll students...is growing more intense throughout a wide range of colleges” (p. 361). While there have been a myriad of rankings of higher educational institutions, graduates are further confounded between the “apples and oranges” in their choices. Students are not without a plethora of conflicting characteristics concerning the choices they make for higher education. Would illumination of graduates’ perception of customer service and performance excellence have an impact on how others make their choices for higher education? This remains to be seen.

The problem, then, was to determine from the insights of individuals who have obtained at least a master’s level education what they believe would be required for their college or university to provide positive customer service and performance excellence. This research sought



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from a graduate's (one who has completed master's level or doctorate degree) perspective, what the requirements are for an educational institution to have met the needs of graduates in the area of customer service and performance excellence. This insight could, in turn, lead to a greater awareness of best-in-class attributes or characteristics. Is there a set of measurements or attributes that are focused on the primary customer's needs which could offer an institution a path toward outstanding customer service? What, if anything, have the college/university's graduates thought about this? This was the focus of this research.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to discover how graduates of higher education perceive customer satisfaction and performance excellence from the graduate schools they have attended.

It was anticipated that interviewing the graduates would reveal their perceived relative importance of their college or university's performance excellence strategies. Interviewing graduates' perceptions of customer satisfaction and performance excellence was expected to reveal a set or group of characteristics or attributes of student-centered measurements that would be useful in positively influencing institutions toward a common goal of customer satisfaction. The task lay in the balance of deciding how specific a set of initial high-level attributes or measurements should be to have influenced graduates. In other words, the assignment would become how to specifically breakdown the characteristics or attributes the graduates would list into a manageable set.

This study sought to investigate how graduates perceive customer service from institutions of higher learning. While this is fairly open-ended, the research endeavored to reveal what graduates thought about customer service and performance excellence prior to beginning their advanced degrees, as well as what they thought about those subjects after they had

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completed their advanced degrees. An expectation of this research was that the study would reveal a set of attributes that would be important from the graduates' perceptions of positive customer service and performance excellence. Additionally, this research sought to add to the body of knowledge of increasing performance and improving excellence strategies.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guided this study was "What are the graduate perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning?" To answer this question, additional sub-questions needed to be answered. These sub-questions included:

1. What did graduates think about customer service and performance excellence prior to beginning coursework on their advanced degree?
2. What do graduates think about customer service and performance excellence after completion of their degree?

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed is basic interpretive qualitative research in which the researcher constructed reality in interaction with the social world. Data were collected through interviews and observations within those interviews. The basic goal was to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Purposeful acquisition of knowledge was sought. This research sought to uncover meaning of events and interactions of several individuals in particular situations, and to provide phenomena rich with detail through in-depth insight into participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Purposeful sampling was utilized with the criterion consisting of graduates who had completed at least a master's level degree and had an interest in customer service and/or performance excellence. Snowball sampling led to graduates known to the researcher, other

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leaders and community members recommended by those interviewed, and a member of the American Society for Quality discovered at a conference for the International Team Excellence Award. Maximum variation was sought with no criteria required for the type of educational background or involvement with any particular organizations. The sampling was one of convenience with individuals primarily located in the geographic center of the United States. Specific demographics of those interviewed will be discussed in chapter four.

Two primary research questions included:

1. What did graduates think about customer service and performance excellence prior to beginning their advanced degrees?
2. What do graduates think about customer service and performance excellence after the completion of their degrees?

Additional questions were offered in the event clarification or a broadening of understanding was needed during the interview.

The interview location was determined based upon a mutually agreed upon convenient location with sixty to ninety minutes set aside for each interview. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, as mentioned and shown in Appendix C. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Data analysis consisted of the constant comparative method with the final interpretation culminating after the final interview. In other words, the interview data was analyzed by comparing segments of data to determine similarities and differences. The data was grouped along similar characteristics and each grouping was represented by a title. The purpose was to identify patterns in the data and to arrange the patterns into a relationship (Merriam 2009). Data was also evaluated through the use of qualitative data

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analysis (QDA) software to assist in determining major themes. The Weft QDA software was utilized and its characteristics are discussed further in chapter four. Member checks were utilized to ensure the transcribed data from the interviews was accurate and complete. Member feedback from the transcription reviews offered additional insight and corrections that may have been missed during the original interviews. The purpose of these checks was to ensure the researcher was listening to “the voice of the customer.”

Preliminary data analysis was accomplished following each interview in the form of field notes. Field notes immediately after the interview captured the researcher’s thoughts and feelings about the interview, thereby expressing not only what was said, but also the mood, insights, and other nuances that offer revelations not captured in the spoken word.

Triangulation was utilized in order to validate the information from the interviews. Triangulation included member feedback and field notes. Mathison (1988) offered her insights as to the value of triangulation:

Triangulation is typically perceived to be a strategy for improving the validity of research or evaluation findings: ‘. . . triangulation is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with it or, at least, don’t contradict it’ (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 235). It is essentially a strategy that will aid in the elimination of bias and allow the dismissal of plausible rival explanations. (para. 2)

Therefore this research consisted of a basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative study which has exemplified all the characteristics of qualitative research including that the researcher was interested in understanding how participants made meaning of a situation or phenomenon. This meaning was mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy was inductive, and the outcome was descriptive (Merriam, 2009).

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### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study lay in the area of customer satisfaction or service that the graduates received as indicated by their perception of the same. The study sought to add to the body of knowledge of increasing customer service strategies particularly in institutions of higher learning. This in turn would lead to understanding of problem areas and then to the identification of areas of efficiency and effectiveness for advanced degree institutions. As Isidro (2009) reveals:

If the quality of customer service is less-than-stellar, or there are indications that the customers are not satisfied with the level of customer service, the business needs to know the problems and what specific things to improve. Only by understanding the problem can the business devise effective strategies to solve the problems. (Isidro, para. 1)

Through this process of discovery, this study anticipated uncovering certain customer service and/or performance excellence techniques and attributes that would be applicable to many institutions, and which would assist them in reaching the highest standards in meeting the graduates' satisfaction and needs. It was also hoped that this research would lead to the discovery of barriers that make it difficult for institutions to achieve their highest goals and their vision. Knowledge of the various barriers would be the first step to their eradication.

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions made for this study were:

1. The participant interviews would offer honest and useful data.
2. Participants' experiences since graduation could impact their perceptions.
3. The length of time since the participants' graduation dates could impact their perceptions.

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4. The researcher's bias could affect the outcome and would be purposefully minimized to the extent possible.
5. No other variables exist that would have a major influence on the outcome of this survey.
6. The methodology of the study would not adversely affect the outcome of the study.

### **Limitations**

Some researchers argue that international standards, along with total quality management strategies, can be used in an education context to enhance customer satisfaction, reduce student attrition, and improve graduation rates while reducing costs (Vandenberge, 1995; Spanbauer, 1992). But the academic community has shown substantial resistance to this approach, partly because of its reluctance to adopt strategies from the business world. (Gates, et al., 2002, p. 39)

In addition, this study has the following limitations:

1. Because of resource restrictions, a sample of convenience, generally from the central United States, was used for this study.
2. The outcomes are limited by the natural bias of the researcher for data collection.
3. As the sampling technique was purposeful, identification of information-rich subjects took precedence over any attempts to have equal representation from other factors such as ethnicity, age, economic status, etc.
4. The accuracy of the researcher to measure the outcomes.

### **Definitions**

The following definitions were used for this study:

1. <sup>1</sup> Balanced scorecard—the balanced scorecard is a management system. (Arveson, 1998, para. 3) <sup>2</sup> Balanced scorecard—is a framework designed to help organizations

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- translate their vision and mission statements into measurable performance goals and objectives while taking into account multiple perspectives, including customers, internal business processes, learning, and growth. (Gates. et. al., 2002, p. 144)
2. Best in Class—Highest current performance level in an industry, used as a standard or benchmark to be equaled or exceeded. (BusinessDictionary.com, 2010)
  3. Best Practice—A best practice is a technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result. (Bitpipe.com, Feb 7, 09)
  4. Continuous Improvement—a quality philosophy that assumes further improvements are always possible and that processes should be continuously reevaluated and improvements implemented. (Lomag-man.org, 2009)
  5. Dashboard—a dashboard is a reporting tool that consolidates, aggregates and arranges metrics, measurements and sometimes scorecards on a single screen so information can be monitored at a glance. (DMReview.com, 2008)
  6. Dashboard metrics (indicators) – key performance indicators (KPI) displayed in an easy-to-grasp method. KPIs are building blocks of management visualizations, as they are the most effective means of alerting users to where they are in relationship to their objectives. (Gonzales, 2006, para. 3)
  7. Learning-centered education—The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners, their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs; the best available knowledge about learning, how it occurs and teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of

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motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners. (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9)

8. Organizational Development—Collaborating with organizational leaders and their groups to create systemic change and root-cause problem-solving on behalf of improving productivity and employee satisfaction, by improving the human processes through which they get their work done. (Broom, n.d., para. 2)
9. Process—“a series of actions which repeatedly come together to transform inputs provided by a supplier into outputs received by a customer” (Walton, 1991, p. 109).
10. Performance Excellence—<sup>1</sup>“the result of a pragmatic system of continual improvement driven by student needs, expectations, and requirements” (Shipley, 2008, para. 12). <sup>2</sup>“Performance Excellence refers to an integrated approach to organizational performance management that results in delivery of ever-improving value to customers and stakeholders, contributing to organizational sustainability; improvement of overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities; and organizational and personal learning.” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011, p. 2)
11. Total Quality Management—A comprehensive philosophy of living and working in organizations that emphasizes the relentless pursuit of continuous improvement. Its essence can be simplified to three ideas: defining quality, improving the organization’s work performance (or “technical system”), and improving its administrative system. (Chaffee & Sherr, 1992, p. 6)



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12. Student-centered—Is the focus geared from a student (client) perspective, a teacher’s perspective or the institution’s perspective? To be student-centered means to hear the voice of the customer. (Gobeille, 2003)
13. Systemic Change—is change that occurs in all aspects and levels of the educational process and that affects all of the people included in this process--students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members. It is a dynamic process that requires constant communication and evaluation and has implications for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995, para. 1)
14. Vision—Vision is a short, succinct, and inspiring statement of what the organization intends to become and to achieve at some point in the future, often stated in competitive terms. (Koteinikov, 2008, para. 2)
15. Voice of the customer—A process used to capture the requirements/feedback from the customer (internal or external) in order to provide the customer with the best-in-class service/product quality. The ‘voice of the customer’ is the term used to describe the stated and unstated needs or requirements of the customer. (Gobeille, 2003, para. 1)

### **Summary**

This introduction has given an overview of the problem of how graduates perceive their college or university’s customer service and performance excellence attributes and, in turn, how they might make their choices for attendance and recommendation to others. Implicit in this research was whether or not the student was satisfied with his or her experience with the institution of choice. Interviewing graduates would determine their perceptions of performance

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excellence from institutions of higher learning. Those perceptions may have led to an understanding of how colleges or universities measure what is important from a student's/graduate's perspective. This research also sought to add to the body of knowledge of increasing performance and improvement strategies particular to colleges and universities.

The following chapter will delve deeper into the literature that serves as the foundation for process excellence and for institutions of higher learning's desire and/or need to continuously seek improvement through listening to the voice of the customer. The literature in adult education regarding participation and non-participation in training and educational programming will also be discussed.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformation is required in government, industry, education. Management is in a stable state. Transformation is required to move out of the present state. The transformation required will be a change of state, metamorphosis, not mere patchwork on the present system of management. We must of course solve problems and stamp out fires as they occur, but these activities do not change the system. (Anttilla quoting Deming, 2011, para. 3)

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review has been to discuss the implications of student perceptions and what students might have considered that constitutes positive customer service and performance excellence in higher education. This review will examine aspects of leadership, organizational development, human resources, the value of teams and teamwork, and visioning. It will also review features of best-in-class institutions, how they focus on student-centered measurements, and the impact of those measurements on institutions of higher learning. Whenever an organization reviews their measurements, the measurements they choose will drive the organization and will determine what is highlighted and therefore what is accomplished. It has been attributed to Belasco as well as others that organizations should “evaluate what you want—because what gets measured gets produced” (Quotes, 2010, para. 1). In the review of an institution’s measurements, there have been closely related issues which come into view and need be assessed for their impact on both the development and the implementation of those organization’s measurements. These issues include, but are not limited to, the areas of leadership, management, team development, process improvement, strategic planning, and performance excellence.

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Throughout literature, when discussing the issue of measuring the effectiveness of colleges and universities, the discussion often turns to evaluating the providers. However, Gates, et al. (2002), informs us that “the assessment of any education system involves more than assessing individual providers of that education” (p. 25). Universities and colleges worldwide struggle to find the set of measurements that will enable them to reach their proposed vision and complete their mission. Institutions of higher learning hope to discover those student-centered measurements that constitute “dashboard” measurements for greater customer satisfaction and fiscal stability. The findings sought were hoped to reveal sufficient descriptive evidence useful for the institutions to emulate that which would propel them toward performance excellence. In a best-case scenario, performance excellence would lead to best-in-class (Nebraska Performance Excellence Center, 2010, para. 4).

The search for performance excellence and customer service in higher education has been ongoing, but specific literature on the subject has not been readily available. Bruffee (1999) believed that major changes were needed in higher education, particularly in the “relations we assume between college and university professors and their students, between the learned and the learning” (para. 1). Discussing the educational needs of graduates, Bruffee (1999) has told us:

The problem is not that graduate professors do not know what they need to know. The problem is that most of them have learned what they know entirely under the traditional social conditions of academic alienation and aggression. Indeed, the problem is that members of current graduate faculties were selected into the profession in part because they evidenced those traits. As a result, their fine education and superb reputations as scholars and critics may in some cases actually subvert their ability to understand

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knowledge as a social construct, learning as an adult social process, and teaching as a role of leadership among adults. (para. 9)

One recurring theme found in literature concerning process improvement was the requirement to constantly survey the customer (student/graduate) and other primary stakeholders (Zarca, 2011, Reh, 2011). Those universities that have continually surveyed their customers not only have identified who the customers are -- an important first step -- but have kept their focus on the heartbeat of their customers and are poised to act in accordance with the leading indicators to not only retain market share, but to dramatically increase it as well.

### **The Role of Quality**

While this research studied issues around customer service and performance excellence, in the 1980s and 90s it was most frequently referred to as quality or quality improvement (History of Quality, 2007, para. 18 & 19). Interestingly, Garvin, in his history lesson on the evolution of quality, gave an insight into its development over the years. He has told us that the “discipline is still evolving.” In addition, we are informed that

Most approaches to quality have emerged gradually, arriving through steady evolution rather than dramatic breakthroughs. They are the product of a series of discoveries stretching back over a century. In the United States, these discoveries can be organized into four distinct ‘quality eras’: inspection, statistical quality control, quality assurance, and strategic quality management. (Garvin, 1988, p. 3)

We were taught in the 1990s that the best organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would not be the ones implementing quality, but the ones implementing it the fastest and most effectively. Unfortunately, the realization of most organizations implementing or focusing on quality -- otherwise known as process improvement or performance excellence -- has yet to occur.

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It has been the author's experience that inspection and quality control have been very much alive in industry. While these methods have their place, they fall woefully short of actually improving processes. Measurements drive quality but leadership determines the type of measurements. Moreover, the types of measurement an organization utilizes drive it toward performance excellence or simply to quality control. In 1956, Feigenbaum, under the auspices of quality assurance, proposed a new step, "total quality control." "The underlying principle of this total quality view... was to recognize that quality is everybody's job" (Garvin, 1988, p. 13). The effort to involve everyone in the organization in the quality process has been a challenge for leadership and has consistently demanded leaders' attention. This has given some insight into why it is not as prevalent as one would suppose.

The term "Strategic Quality Management" may continue to be associated with the current reality of performance excellence and all it implies. Other terms such as Six-Sigma and its associated DMAIC model (define-measure-analyze-improve-control) (Edgeman, n.d.), process improvement, and best-in-class management all lend themselves to the following

...dramatic shift in perspective. For the first time, top managers, at the level of presidents and chief executive officers, have expressed an interest in quality. They have linked it with profitability, defined it from the customer's point of view, and required its inclusion in the strategic planning process. In the most radical departure of all, many have insisted that quality be viewed as an aggressive competitive weapon." (Gavin, 1988, p. 21)

It is important to note that the term "quality" had, and still has, different and distinct meanings in various industries and with various customers. For example, "the transcendent; the definition of quality is innate excellence, user-based; quality is a reflection of consumer's preferences, and

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value-based; quality is performance or conformance at an acceptable price or cost” (Garvin, 1988, p. 217).

Should colleges or universities seek to focus on quality and develop quality measurements for their institutions? Certainly there is much debate about this. One university president (Collins, 2007) writes about his university in this manner: “Entrepreneurs and business executives make strategic decisions all the time to differentiate themselves. So should we in higher education” (p. B. 2). Some universities are already engaged in seeking various ways to measure themselves or their output. For example Wheeler (2007) informs us that:

In one of the most sweeping responses yet to calls for accountability in higher education, a public-university association has adopted a template, called the College Portrait, which will allow institutions to share with outsiders online data about such matters as students' academic progress. (p. A.19)

According to Wheeler two state systems and several other state institutions are already beginning to use this measurement system.

With this in mind, it would seem advantageous to look at models that tend to simplify the process of developing a standard system of measurements or attributes that could be universally adapted. One example was found in a university posting on the web its vision, mission and five major areas of measurement that include: graduates and community; financial sustainability and accountability; the internal processes, partners, and learning; innovation; and growth of their people. Of course, each of these is further defined for use by the organization. Another example given by a southern university was to be rated at or near the top of the ladder in their primary focus areas. A third example of standardizing a quality system of measurements was through the use of benchmarking and comparisons with best-in-class.

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These methods simply give direction in researching universally adaptable systems of measurements or sub-systems which could help identify common student-centered measurements for a majority of colleges and universities. Another example in what or how to assess came from a junior college in Modesto, California. Apparently, the small junior college administration and staff researched what multiple institutions have measured and came up with a rubric to guide higher learning organizations in their development of a set of personalized measurements. They identified the assessment continuum and broke it down into five stages. Each of these stages was measured according to its level of maturity in the four areas, “faculty engagement, institutional commitment, level of saturation/penetration, and level of dialogue” (CAI, 2005, p.1-2). Of course, whether or not any of these models or processes would have an impact on the student from his or her perspective remained to be seen. Another consideration was the likely resistance by administrators to the selection of student-centered measurements to a wide range of educational institutions.

William Edwards Deming was well known in Japan and in the United States for his influence in stressing the importance of changing the management system to make significant improvements in the organization. Deming (1986) insisted that 85% of the problems an organization faces were “systems induced,” that is, they were the responsibility of the management since others in the organization have little to no control over any given issue or its results. If an institution of higher learning wished to make a major impact in its performance and to produce excellent results, then they needed to pay strict attention to their major processes and how they were measured.

Deming has had his detractors as well as his supporters, but he has been difficult to ignore and many of the management principles he has promoted have proven their effectiveness.



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His (1986) 14 points for management in his world-renowned book, “Out of the Crisis,” have led many organizations toward performance excellence. While he focused on the manufacturing industry, the educational arena has been ripe for implementation of his management principles as well. He also promoted the “soft skills” of team work and trust; however, these are a much harder sell in the world of business. Tortorella states that:

Some think that Deming's program cannot succeed precisely because it is so utopian, requiring as it does actions guided by such easily damaged values as trust and teamwork, or because it is so hard for mere mortals to live up to the standards Deming set. But his program has had notable success: Ford Motor Company and Xerox Corporation in the U.S. and Toyota Motor Company in Japan are only a few of the most outstanding examples. Deming merely asks that we rise above ourselves, and he gives us a framework in which this can be a positive feedback system. (1995, p. 3)

Is it possible to “rise above ourselves” (Tortorella, 1995, para. 22) as Deming asks, or is the risk too unknown or too great? Deming is also known for the quote, “It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory” (BrainyQuote, 2010. para. 9). There is no mandate for universities or colleges to make improvements, but then there is no mandate that any organization, for profit or otherwise, to stay in business.

As one would surmise, the respected master of quality improvement, Joseph Juran (1992), had much to say about quality measurements. Quality, as defined by Juran, was first of all not a single definition. He broke “quality” into at least two types: one has been termed “Little Q” and naturally the other labeled as “Big Q.” Strictly speaking, Juran defined quality as “1) product features that respond to customer needs; 2) freedom from deficiencies.” (p. 503). Little Q is defined as “A term used to designate a narrow scope of quality, limited to clients, factory

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goods, and factory processes” (p. 507). Big Q, on the other hand (and what quality has really been about) was defined as “A term used to designate a broad concept of quality in which ‘customers’ includes all who are impacted; ‘product’ includes good and services, ‘processes’ includes business and support processes.” (p. 510). Juran was adamant in telling his audience that quality has been much more than inspection and compliance. However, since the word “quality” has been so overused in the past decade, it has fallen out of favor and more descriptive words have taken its place. These words have included performance excellence and process improvement as well as others. Nevertheless, the goals of quality (Big Q), process improvement, and performance excellence have tended to be the same. Learning the skills and paying attention to the principles has enabled leaders to move their organizations toward their stated vision and mission and complete the desired results. Additionally, having the right measurements has seemed to be the key to the entire process.

“Knowledge workers should never stop learning. However, it’s up to them to incorporate continuous learning as a natural part of daily life— deciding what and how they’d like to learn and determining how they’ll build in the time” (Rosenstein, 2009, para. 8) and, more to the point, Marsh (2001) reveals

Schools have many processes in common with other organizations. They produce strategic plans, recruit and develop staff, deploy resources and require principle-centered leadership. While the application of total quality at this level can produce improvements in efficiency, it probably won’t inspire students, or deal with the real root issues that lie within the learning processes. The next level is teaching total quality to students. The philosophy needs to be covered in its totality, along with methods and tools. This becomes more exciting because it enables the school to move to the highest level. The

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highest level is total quality in learning...

Combine an understanding of profound knowledge with the deadly diseases, and you'll have a solid foundation on which to develop methods. If methods contravene these principles, they should be ignored. If they align well, then they should be considered for development. The students at Mt. Edgecumbe have interpreted the 14 points for an educational environment. Some of their conclusions will challenge the core beliefs of our current approach to education. (para. 4 & 10)

As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest, there is a “body of evidence from the 1990s [*that*] is consistent with our 1991 conclusion that students become more mature, knowledgeable, and focused during college” (p. 534). Strongly suggested in this literature review has been the need to continue to learn as a part of daily life, learning has been a natural maturing process, and this process has produced improvements.

### **The Balanced Scorecard**

Kaplan has been credited as being the father of the balanced scorecard (VietNamNet Bridge, 2009, Business section, para. 2). The definition for balanced scorecard was given in the first chapter of this study. Kaplan suggested that a balanced scorecard links and integrates four strategic questions. These include “How do our customer and/or clients see us?” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 2). This presupposes that the organization has identified who their customers/clients are. There have been many interpretations for this; thus the imperative for each organization is to identify who their customers are in order to align their goals and process toward a common end. Many organizations have been confused on this point.

The second question Kaplan asks is “What are our core competencies and processes at which we must excel?” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 2). Again, this has been critical due to limited

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resources we all have faced. Our priorities indicate what has been most important to each of us. Thirdly, the question was “How are we performing overall?” (Kaplan, 1996, p.3). This question has helped to establish a baseline and a continuous estimate in measuring the organization’s health. The final key strategic question was “How can we continue to improve the performance environment of our employees and recognize that they are our most important asset?” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 4). This question reveals a focus on the internal customer. Clearly, an organization’s employees are its lifeblood and must be recognized as such in order for the establishment to be as effective as possible. Kaplan further defined the four questions in light of four requirements to which each institution must commit. These four requirements have been the need to “Identify the most critical variables, create measurements for each variable, develop objectives and targets that consider each question/variable in relation to the organization’s vision, and determine how the objectives and variables link and align with the organization’s strategy” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 4).

Many organizations have used a methodology to lead them through the determination of key measurements (key quality indicators). Many universities such as Columbia, Fordham, Clemson, Florida State, Northwest Missouri State, Oregon State, East Tennessee State, Wisconsin and others (Tortorella, 1995, Hislop, 1999, Meter & Smith, 1994, Temponi, 2005, Stewart, 1996, Lui, 2009) have used Deming’s Plan-Do-Check-Act process or similar improvement process to guide their paths toward excellence. The following is a seven step process that has been useful in the search for that ever elusive “balanced” set of measurements:

Step 1: Define Key Quality Indicators (KQI)

Step 2: Validate KQIs

Step 3: Establish goals and develop a deployment strategy

Step 4: Formulate an assessment strategy to track performance

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Step 5: Establish baselines, track trends and do competitive comparisons

Step 6: Benchmarking

Step 7: Set performance targets and/or stretch goals. (Kaplan, 1996, p. 7)

This methodology has allowed organizations to solicit feedback from all the stakeholders and to continuously improve upon the products or services that they determined were important for their organization. Several universities have bought into the Kaplan and Norton balanced scorecard design, in which they have identified the four critical measurements of “customer, financial, internal processes, and learning and growth” (BNET, 2005, Video File). A video file produced by the CBS interactive business network (BNET, 2005) showed the moderator, who described the balance scorecard in the following way:

What's interesting about balanced scorecard is it was rolled out in 1992. The last data that I saw is that more than half of the Fortune 1000 was using balanced scorecard. It's become an organizing of a performance and metric system for many corporations, and it's more relevant today than when it was rolled out in 1992. (Video File)

Organizations today that tend to be innovative and successful in a rapidly growing economy have viewed themselves from a more balanced perspective. As stated, the balanced scorecard includes the four dimensions of financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth. Gulick (BNET, 2005) reported that it is still important to look at the financials from a profitability and growth standpoint as viewed by shareholders. The customer dimension has also been important, since an organization should look at how they add value or differentiate between their products or services. The internal business processes should be the things at which the organization excels. Measurements in this area are critical for the medium to long-range sustainability.

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Finally, reviewing the learning and growth dimension allows the organization to understand the extent to which it has fostered a climate that enables people to be innovative and creative to build value for their customers (BNET, 2005). These four dimensions seemed to be one method that offered the necessary tools for organizations to monitor their progress relative to other similar institutions.

### **The Customer**

It is clear that a crucial prior step has been to determine exactly the identity of the customer. In the educational arena, many suggestions have surfaced, not the least of which has been the student. After all, the student has received the product (training) and has used that product for his/her own purposes. However, many have disagreed with this simplistic view, stating that the community or businesses have been the customer. After all, they have been the ones that received the results of the training and must deal with those results. Many businesses have lamented the lack of knowledge or understanding from college graduates (Harvey & Mason, 1996, p. 146, Kaijage, 1997, pp. 7 & 13, GradIreland.com, 2010, para. 9 – 13).

The author, as an experienced adjunct professor for three local colleges in their undergraduate and graduate programs, has witnessed the “pull of the bottom line” requiring not only giving a passing grade to a “paying customer” but also the pressure to pass them with high marks. The question again remains, “Who is the customer?” Additionally, since the education arena has not been viewed as the business arena, although many equate it as such, it has been often argued that it should not be run as a business. How then should the customers be treated? This has not been unlike the medical field in which the doctors, especially in hospitals, often consider themselves the customers while they are also the suppliers. Graduates have not necessarily been suppliers. Nevertheless, alumni have often been a source of considerable

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income for the institution. The community, especially businesses, has thought of themselves as the customers of the educational system. Certainly those who pay for the education have considered themselves the customers of the system. Yet there have been many who pay for education who have not been graduates themselves. Parents, businesses awarding financial assistance, government grants and loans, and even the educational system itself through scholarships have been the paying customers. This muddies the waters and makes it difficult to determine a primary customer and focus.

### **Creating the Climate for Performance Excellence**

The Baldrige education criteria focuses on performance excellence and students excelling. The Malcolm Baldrige National Award program, run by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) with assistance from the American Society for Quality (ASQ),

The American Society for Quality (ASQ) assists in administering the award program under contract to NIST. ASQ's vision is to make quality a global priority, an organizational imperative, and a personal ethic and, in the process, to become the community for all who seek quality concepts, technology, or tools to improve themselves and their world. ASQ is dedicated to the ongoing development, advancement, and promotion of quality concepts, principles, and techniques. ASQ strives to be the world's recognized champion and leading authority on all issues related to quality. ASQ recognizes that continuous quality improvement will help the favorable positioning of American goods and services in the international marketplace. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. C2)

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The Baldrige criteria have seven categories, the third category being customer focus. The education criteria have three main goals toward performance excellence. The criteria are ...designed to help provide organizations with an integrated approach to organizational performance management that results in (1) delivery of ever-improving value to students and stakeholders, contributing to education quality and organizational stability, (2) improvement of overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities, and (3) organizational and personal learning. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 49)

This third criterion implies that educational institutions must know their customers and understand their needs, specifically by asking themselves the question, “How does this organization listen to students and stakeholders and gain satisfaction and dissatisfaction information?” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 13) The table in Appendix E shows Baldrige Criteria Item 3.1 and the areas that are addressed within that item. The criteria suggested to the organization that it must “determine the student and stakeholder satisfaction and engagement” and “listen to the voice of the customer” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 13). In order to listen to the voice of the customer, satisfy and engage them, the organization must know who they are. Identifying the specific customers of an organization is critical and is tied directly into the vision, because as McDermott said, “The plan is to be 100% focused on the customer” (BNET, 2007, Video File).

One of the core values of the Baldrige educational criteria is learning-centered education. For the purposes of this research, the terms “learning-centered” and “student-centered” are used interchangeably; they have been described in the following manner:



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Performance and quality are judged by an organization's students and stakeholders. Thus, your organization must take into account all educational program and service features and support that contribute value to your students and stakeholders. Such behavior leads to student and stakeholder acquisition, satisfaction, preference, and loyalty; to positive referrals; and, ultimately, to organizational sustainability. Student-centered excellence has both current and future components: understanding today's student and stakeholder desires and anticipating future desires and market potential. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 49)

Learning-centered education is a decisive model that has been strategic in its application in order to be constantly aware of changing needs with the consumer (stakeholder) as well as in the marketplace. The Baldrige educational criteria list the key characteristics of learning-centered education. These themes are integrated into the criteria.

The Education Criteria consider several important education concepts and the specific needs of education organizations. These include the following:

- The Education Criteria place a primary focus on teaching and learning because these are the principal goals of education organizations.
- While the Education Criteria stress a focus on student learning for all education organizations, individual organizational missions, roles, and programs will vary for different types of organizations (e.g., primary and secondary schools, trade schools, engineering schools, or teaching and research organizations).
- Students are the key customers of education organizations, but there may be multiple stakeholders (e.g., parents, employers, other schools, and communities).

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- The concept of excellence includes three components: (1) a well-conceived and well-executed assessment strategy; (2) year-to-year improvement in key measures and indicators of performance, especially student learning; and (3) demonstrated leadership in performance and performance improvement relative to comparable organizations and to appropriate benchmarks. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 55)

It should be noted that the Baldrige criteria identifies students as the “key customers of educational organizations, but there may be multiple stakeholders (e.g. parents, employers, other schools, and communities)” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2011-2012, p. 55).

In fact, Malcolm Baldrige Award-winning University of Wisconsin-Stout identified five primary stakeholders and their respective requirements in order to understand and meet their various needs. The five primary stakeholders are listed as “two academic relationships which are the UW System/Board of Regents and feeder schools and three stakeholder relationships including the employers, alumni, and the community” (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, 2001a, p. iii). The table in Appendix F is an example how one university which won the national Baldrige award identified their customers/stakeholders, the relationship with those stakeholders, and the main requirements.

The purpose of establishing what the vision should be for the organization -- what its mission should be, what the objectives and goals are, who the customers are -- is to create performance excellence. In a world that is rapidly shrinking (Blezu & Popa, 2008, p 6), the choices that a potential student has in determining his or her educational institution have continued to grow and become almost limitless (Blezu & Popa, 2008, p 1). The college or university that does not pay attention to the basic needs of its customer will be in danger of

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fading out of existence just as easily as a business would go bankrupt if it failed to listen to its customers (Teachout, 2009, para. 1-2). Many organizations might have said, “This is good enough.” However, customers and stakeholders are becoming much more consumer savvy and the internet has closed the gap, so that there are a myriad of colleges and universities available to anyone with web access (Teachout, 2009, para. 8-10).

Dave Kyllonen told us that “Good enough is the enemy of excellence” (1996, p 46). Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great” agreed and further stated, “Good is the enemy of great” (2001, p.1). Being good enough has been determined by the customer of the product or service (Alvarez, 2009, para. 9). Good enough has often been a euphemism that has indicated putting forth enough effort to pass with just the minimum work requirement (Sisson, n.d. para. 10-12). When the term “good enough” was raised, it was a reminder of the phrase and its origins (The Big Apple, 2010, para. 1-2). The phrase “good enough for government work” was first recognized in the World War II era and referred to materials and production that were used to send to the “boys” overseas and therefore needed to be the highest quality possible because lives were on the line (The Big Apple, 2010, para. 3). Over time, the meaning of the phrase has done a 180-degree turn so that “to the average American today, it means less than one’s best effort. It also is a reflection of a culture that accepts poor quality as a way of doing business” (Rooney, 2006, para. 2). How this came about is unknown (Rooney, 2006, para. 4), but what remained was the general attitude of “shoddy work” (Western Mass Politics and Insight, 2010, para. 4) and seemed to permeate our society in doing a job, or meeting a need, or putting out the effort that was good enough. “If it is not a failure of any individual, it could be the culture of laziness and lip-service diligence that permeates all the way into the state's numerous agencies that serve the

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public good” (Western Mass Politics and Insight, 2010, para. 4). This attitude could be detrimental to organizations and paralyze institutions. As Burns (1996-2011) described:

There is an unsettling attitude running rampant in Corporate America today: the attitude of good enough. That's what happened with GM - they went to the market with an attitude of ‘good enough.’ But when times got tough and people pulled in their spending, ‘good enough’ wasn't good enough. It's a lesson every single consumer, employee, business owner, CEO and entrepreneur should take heed of. (para. 15)

Customers, clients, graduates, and others have been quick to recognize the symptoms of poor quality and have also been quick to relocate their business. White papers from Cvent (2000-2011), a large online event management and registrar company, informed us that:

Customer satisfaction matters. It matters not only to the customer, but even more so to the business because it directly impacts a company's bottom line profits. Furthermore, it is one of the most important components of a company's positive brand image. (p. 1)

Collins (2001) reiterated, “Yes, leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted” (p. 74). He loathed “good enough” and stressed that to overcome that mentality, the organization's leadership must “create a climate where the truth is heard” (2001, p. 74). Collins offered four best practices:

1. Lead with questions not answers. Use questions for only one reason: to gain understanding. Don't use questions as a form of manipulation or as a way to blame or put down others.
2. Engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion. All good-to-great companies had a penchant for intense dialogue. Phrases like ‘loud debate,’ ‘heated discussions,’ and ‘healthy conflict’ peppered the articles and interview transcripts from all the

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- companies. They didn't use discussion as a sham process to let people 'have their say' so they could have a 'buy in' to a predetermined decision. The process was more like a heated scientific debate, with people engaged in a search for the best answers.
3. Conduct autopsies, without blame. When you conduct autopsies without blame, you go a long way toward creating a climate where the truth is heard. If you have the right people on the bus, you should almost never need to assign blame but need only to search for understanding and learning.
  4. Build 'red flag' mechanisms. The key, then, lies not in better information, but in turning information into information that cannot be ignored. (2001, pp. 74-79)

Collins thus offered a researched method to build the necessary measurements to create an institution that thrives on performance excellence.

This research further explored Collin's (2001) principles of what an organization is best at and what their passion is that has value in the eyes of their students and former students. Still, his principle of determining what drove the organization's economic engine demanded closer scrutiny. Although this research did not focus economic indicators, the data on reviewing the economic indicators provided insight into the creation of the student-centered measurements and attributes and how they affected the graduates in this study. Collins' book did uncover "one particularly provocative form of economic insight that every good-to-great company has attained. This was the notion of the single 'economic denominator'" (2001, p. 194). He described this in the following terms:

If you could pick one and only one ratio—profit per x (or in the social sector, cash flow per x)—to systematically increase over time, what x would have the greatest and most

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sustainable impact on your economic engine? We learned that this single question leads to profound insight into the inner working of an organization's economics. (2001, p. 194)

Collins went on to give an example of a department store/convenience store/drive in pharmacy (Walgreens) that significantly increased profit by focusing on a different "x" than the standard metric of profit per store. They turned this type of thinking completely around by changing to the concept of profit per customer through increased convenience and diversification of products and services. This drove the change in Walgreen's approach to actually build nine stores in a one mile radius in San Francisco and they increased profitability as well (2001, p. 92). This type of insight leads to the possibility that a simple attribute or a few simple measurements well understood could drive an organization toward performance excellence.

### **The Role of Leadership and Creating Value**

Whenever an organization has looked at measuring its quality systems, closely related have been its leadership systems. Townsend and Gephardt (1997) wrote:

If leadership and quality are not flip sides of the same coin, they were at least struck in the same mint. Without leadership, a quality effort inevitably transforms itself into a by-the-numbers productivity effort...Leadership is the creation of an environment in which others can self-actualize in the process of completing the task. (para.1-2)

That is, the health of the organization is dependent on the leadership systems that drive the institution. As Nesteby (2009) said:

Most high-performing organizations will have a leadership system deployed throughout the organization. The leadership system refers to how leadership is provided formally and informally across the organization and is the basis for how decisions are made and how communication is conducted. (p. 2)

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Of course, books on leadership abound by the scores (Patton, 2001, Nesteby, 2009). It has often been difficult to determine characteristics and theories from which to choose. As Nesteby (2009) wrote, “The list will vary greatly depending on your personal preferences and past experiences. For many, leadership boils down to each of us, as individuals, identifying and searching for the characteristics that are most appealing to us” (p.1). While Lencioni’s books have yet to withstand the test of time, there is something profoundly simplistic and poignant in his writings. His (Lencioni, 2000) “Four Obsessions...” offers keen insight to the success of an organization by looking at its health. Lencioni admits that the health of an organization is difficult to measure; however organizational health is based on reaching and maintaining four specific disciplines. These are: “1. Build and maintain a cohesive leadership team. 2. Create organizational clarity. 3. Over-communicate organizational clarity. 4. Reinforce organizational clarity through human systems” (Lencioni, 2000, p. 141).

For the purpose of this research, two factors seem to jump out of this list. One is reaching that mysterious cohesive leadership team and the other is achieving organizational clarity. The first is not only elusive, but also the most important. Lencioni said it was “elusive because it requires considerable interpersonal commitment from an executive team and its leader, and it is critical because it enables the other three disciplines” (p. 140). In order to build a cohesive team, the leadership must build trust. Lencioni described this as the “absence of politics, unnecessary anxiety and wasted energy” (2001, p. 143).

The second factor is integral to the other three disciplines. This factor is listed as organizational clarity and includes establishing, communicating and reinforcing. Organizational clarity is defined as:

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Agreeing on the fundamental concepts that drive it. It is important because it provides employees at all levels of an organization with a common vocabulary and set of assumptions about what is important and what is not. It also allows them to make decisions and resolve problems without constant supervision and advice from managers. Organizational clarity allows a company to delegate more efficiently and empower its employees with a true sense of confidence. (Lencioni, 2001, p. 151)

When an organization understands what it should be clear about, the next step is to determine how to achieve it. With a cohesive team, the leadership must be willing to be aggressive and transparent as they ask themselves the questions from the table listed in Appendix G. The questions were designed to assist the leadership team in their quest to provide everyone in the organization a “common vocabulary and set of assumptions about what is important and what is not” (Lencioni, 2001, p. 151).

Baldrige Performance Excellence Program offered eleven recommendations for senior leaders, as follows:

1. Set the vision and think strategically. Understand your organization’s current situation.
2. Live by your stated values and ethics. You must be the role model for adhering to them and using them as the ultimate decision tool in difficult situations.
3. There is no such thing as business as usual. That concept is history. Be prepared to take intelligent risks that will build the organization if actions are successful and not devastate it if unsuccessful.



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4. Manage by fact. Metrics are needed not only for outcomes measures but also for in-process and leading measures so that you know when to change course or stop an exploratory effort.
5. Leave time for reflection and crises. Expect at least one potentially career-threatening event a year. Time pressures are always great, and reserving time for thinking is necessary but hard to do.
6. Build a trusted executive team. You must be able to rely on this team in difficult situations. Once decisions are made, trust and loyalty are important.
7. Build a relationship with your board. Know your board members individually and their individual strengths.
8. View situations through the eyes of your customers and stakeholders. They are critical to sustaining your enterprise.
9. Celebrate and reward success. We need to spend more energy on celebrating successes, even interim milestones, to build morale and commitment to continue. Stretch goals are achieved through extraordinary commitment.
10. Develop talent and continue to learn. Your biggest legacy may well be the talent you develop to permit continuity in leadership and innovation to flourish.
11. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Communication requires speaking, listening, and hearing what is on employees' and other stakeholders' minds. Communication can be an important leverage point. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2010c, para. 3)

These recommendations came from the synthesized guidance of the panel of judges and the director of the Baldrige Program which recognized that the highest single scoring criteria item

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was the one that dealt with senior leadership. (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2010c, para. 1)

Collins identified companies, organizations and institutions on their way to “greatness” as being in a process. Greatness did not happen overnight. Although the media seem to give the impression that leaders simply wake up with a “Eureka, I’ve found it!” epiphany, it rarely occurs that way. Instead, Collins (2001) used the analogy of a giant flywheel that takes all one’s energy to just get it barely moving. As pressure is continuously applied in a constant direction, the flywheel moves only perceptively faster. It may take months or years to get the flywheel (organization) to move at a rapid enough pace to be noticed by the “outside” world (p. 14), usually when the organization’s results become too good to pass up. However, Collins also identified the “doom loop” that may allow an organization to catch the public’s eye, but they tend to be a flash in the pan. The doom loop is defined as an organization having a new direction, program leader, event, fad, or acquisition and then moving, but with no buildup or accumulated momentum. This leads to disappointing results which further lead to reactions without understanding and the doom loop cycle starts over again (Collins, 2001, p. 179). In order for organizations to understand whether they have been on the flywheel from good to great or on the doom loop, Collins created the table as shown in Appendix H with signs to assist in its determination.

In building measurements that resonate with the leadership of higher educational institutions, similar to building good to great companies, leaders must recognize that there rarely is a “quick fix.” In fact, the opposite is much truer. It takes considerable time to develop the necessary measurements that propel an organization towards its true potential on a path leading to performance excellence. A case in point came from the legendary Sam Walton. Collins wrote

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that “Sam Walton began in 1945 with a single dime store. He didn’t open his second store until seven years later. Walton built incrementally, step by step, turn by turn of the flywheel...” (2001, p. 191) until now his company produces revenues of close to \$200 billion.

Sam Walton himself wrote, ‘Somehow over the years people have gotten the impression that Wal-Mart was...just this great idea that turned into an overnight success. But...it was an outgrowth of everything we’d been doing since 1945...And like most overnight successes, it was about twenty years in the making. (as cited in Collins, 2001, p. 191)

As is the case with most great leaders, leadership is an art that must be continuously cultivated. DePree (1989) provided an excellent example and insisted that leadership’s “first responsibility is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor” (p. 11). This was consistent with other great leaders who are measured by how well the organization endures after they are gone. DePree (1989) said, “Leaders need to be concerned with the institutional value system which leads to the principles and standards that guide the practices of the people in the institution. Leaders owe a clear statement of the values of the organization” (p. 14). DePree echoed the common thread other great leaders share, which is caring for their people and for the development of their employees. While this seems tough to measure, it is seen in the health of the organization, in the morale, in the output, in the resiliency of its people, in its teamwork, and in its ability to give meaning to one’s life and work. DePree (1989) emphasized:

We would like to know that our work process uses all of the appropriate and pertinent resources: human, physical, and financial. We would like a work process and relationships that meet our personal needs for belonging, for contributing, for meaningful

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work, for the opportunity to make a commitment, for the opportunity to grow and be a least reasonably in control of our own destinies. (p. 23)

The concept of leadership is so vital to the discussion of the creation of customer service and performance excellence attributes that it must be an integral part of this research. Leaders or leadership ultimately determine the vision for the organization, the mission, and help to establish the goals and objectives. Therefore, the characteristics or attributes that are eventually settled on to measure result in directly impacting whether or not the organization reaches its goals. The best leaders know the critical importance of having the most exceptional set of the smallest number of measurements possible. They are aware of the psychology of the simple yet profound. Others in the organization need to understand the why and how of the measurements; therefore they must be simple in concept. In all cases, they must drill down to the core of the business and uncover the data which is essential to keeping the organization on track. As Juran (1992) said, this leads to the “vital few” (p. 386).

Other leadership qualities include perseverance, accessibility, trustworthiness, and nurturing, to name a few. Phillips, in his extensive study on the leadership of President Lincoln, discovered these attributes were second nature to our sixteenth president. That is not to say we cannot learn from him, for he wrote, “Virtually all outstanding leaders studied were ‘subject to feelings of insecurity and lack of self-esteem.’ Moreover, most developed a dynamic will to succeed, a driving ambition that lasted their entire live” (1992, p. 5). Lincoln was a man acquainted with criticism and failure. Much of his life was spent in sorrow, paying off debt, losing family members in death, and suffering multiple defeats in various elections (1992, pp. 5, 52, 66-68, 109, 158, 167). Nevertheless, he persevered and his life can teach us all significant principles. Lincoln spent most of his time as president outside his oval office. He got out of the

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“ivory tower” and visited the troops and loved talking with the people of the nation. This “gave him the first-hand knowledge he needed to make informed, accurate decisions without having to rely solely on the word of others” (1992, p. 13). Today we would call this management-by-walking-around (MBWA), an important step in keeping the leader in contact with the “field” (Jones, n.d.).

A true measurement will keep a leader in touch with what is actually going on in an organization and is key to obtaining unfiltered data. Phillips reported that “Lincoln was probably the most accessible chief executive the United States has ever known” (1992, p.17).

Accessibility to the leader is certainly critical, but having knowledge of and access to fundamental measurements will also achieve similar results. Key measurements are the rudder that turns the organizational ship. Phillips’ research stated, “By entering your subordinate’s environment—by establishing frequent contact—you create a sense of commitment, collaboration, and community. You gain access to vital information necessary to make effective decisions” (1992, p. 25).

Phillips (1992) also relayed that having an open-door policy and meeting repeatedly and often with others in the organization make the leader appear more positive and trustworthy. This goes a long way in creating an information flow that is less filtered with biases and personal agendas. Another insight Phillips offered from the life of Lincoln is his ability to persuade and his desire to reject the dictatorial style of leadership. Lincoln was much more inclined to make suggestions than to issue orders. In the search and development of appropriate measurements for an organization, the leader would do well to engage the staff and other stakeholders such as the graduates themselves.

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The author's experience has been one in which, as director of quality improvement, he assisted the military leaders on a base to drill down over one hundred and twenty measurements to a much more manageable vital few. The commanders and deputy commanders from four groups (medical, logistics, operations, and base support) worked together on this project over the course of approximately a year to reach a much more reasonable level of measurements which were imperative in helping the leadership accomplish the mission. Through discussions over time, a better set of more manageable measurements were established. All staff understood the value of those measurements and through personal involvement strongly supported the use of them.

Phillips wrote, "Leadership often involves parenting, and Lincoln's fatherly tendencies aided him in his position as president. The organization is the family; the leader is the head of the family. Consequently, leaders often nurture and guide subordinates much as parents do children" (1992, p. 47). Another way of saying this would be that great leaders are able to lead by being led.

It was Lincoln who led the way while at times giving the impression that he was, rather, following the lead of his subordinates. And here, in essence, is one of the marks of his true leadership genius. As Lao Tzu said, 'Fail to honor people, they fail to honor you. But a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will all say, 'We did this ourselves.' Lincoln also had the enviable quality of being able to listen to people and be guided by them without being threatened himself. (1992, pp. 99-100)

The best leaders and best organizations never stop learning. Peter Senge (1990) reiterated that in the long run the only sustainable competitive advantage is your organization's ability to learn faster than the competition. Phillips (1992) made it clear when he stated, "The best leaders

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never stop learning. They possess a special capacity to be taught by those with whom they come in contact. In essence, this ongoing accumulation of knowledge prepares the organization for change” (p. 138).

Not only is learning important in the development of an organization’s key measurements, but so is sharing that knowledge and helping others understand it in the same light as the leadership who speaks it. The art of persuasion is integral to this process and every true leader cultivates it. It is said that “Leadership appears to be the art of getting others to want to do the things you are convinced should be done” (Packard as cited in I-Lead.com, 2004, para. 4).

No art is more important to the leader than persuading others to share in their conviction, to dream their dream, to work as hard as they are willing to work to accomplish a goal. It has been said that only the persuaded can persuade. (Caroselli, 1990, p. 111)

The language of leadership is the language of persuasion. It is also the language of psychology and activism. For through understanding the inner workings of the human mind, a leader can hope to recognize what drives others and motivates them to specific action. Caroselli brought it together in her book when she said,

As every study of leadership will assert, the leader must be one who has a vision: a vision that of necessity encompasses and embraces change. To be able to articulate that future-oriented ideal requires considerable thought and research and exchanging of ideas. (1990, p. 147)

The parallel to one’s organizational development of key measurements should be clear. The leader should articulate what is critical with passion and through multiple exchanges. The

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measurements should drive change, compel improvement, and be the impetus toward reaching the vision that would motivate employees to help create an outstanding institution.

“Highly successful organizations of the future will be based on information,” said Holman (1995, p. 223). What is interesting in his discussion is whether he was talking about methods of communication such as key measurements and technology, or if he was talking about leadership. Of course, both are integral to organizational operations and it would be difficult to try to dissect one from the other. Holman described three reasons management consultant, Peter Drucker, gave for organizations needing to become information-based.

First, is demographic—the knowledge workers who increasingly make up the work force will no longer adhere to the methods of the past. Second is the need for systematized innovation, which is now essentially knowledge work. Third is the requirement to come to terms with information technology. A company must decide what relevance and purpose information has to it. (1995, p. 224)

This research dealt specially with the graduates’ perceptions of what their university has done to meet or exceed their customer service or performance excellence needs. Would these perceptions include an awareness of their institutions’ usage of key measurements? These findings will be discussed in chapter four. It would seem fitting that institutions which embrace performance excellence would seek the ideals of the learning organization and would focus on how they can best use information to drive toward positive customer service processes.

Generally speaking, action is better than inaction just as some communication is better than none. It is important to note that good rules of management include the manager’s consideration of the action to be taken, the consequences and making the appropriate decisions to



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implement the activity. Blanchard and Oncken described the rules of management in the following seemingly simplistic list:

Rule 1. Descriptions: The 'next moves' are specified.

Rule 2. Owners: The 'next moves' are assigned to a person.

Rule 3. Insurance policies: The risk is covered.

Rule 4. 'Next moves' and checkup appointments: The time and place for follow-up is specified. (1989, p. 59)

They went on to list the benefits of following these rules as saving time for the organization for several reasons.

First and foremost, following these rules of management enables the manager/leader to spend adequate time in preparation and planning. Secondly, the strict adherence to the rules leads subordinates to recognize any problem solving requires action on their part. Thirdly, maintaining this type of organization tends to significantly motivate employees as they are keenly aware of where the responsibility and accountability lies (1989, p. 61-63).

Both the development and the implementation of good key measurements are important to the organization for the very reasons listed as good rules of management.

Walton (1986), in writing about Deming management principles reiterated that, "Leadership is the job of management. It is the responsibility of management to discover the barriers that prevent workers from taking pride in what they do. The workers know exactly what these barriers are..." (p. 70). It is the responsibility of leadership to listen and discover the knowledge line workers have that will help the organization achieve their goals and their vision. Some workers are willing to give their expertise and share their knowledge. However, in most

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institutions leaders have found that workers “shoot the messenger” and lower level employees have been unwilling or fearful of supporting any kind of change, including the development of new measurements that could potentially have a perceived negative impact on their struggle to do the work.

Leaders would respond to workers in a more effective way if they were employee-centered versus job-centered, just as educational institutions would be more effective if they were student-centered. Workers, like graduates, tend to be more actively engaged when they believe they have been listened to, respected, and have a say in the matter, whether it is in the way a job is performed or in the method of instruction. Nevertheless it would be naïve to think that everyone would respond better simply because their supervisor is respectful and attentive. Leadership styles should be appropriate for the readiness level of the “follower,” be they a worker or a student. For example, Hersey and Blanchard (1993) identified four leadership styles to match with four levels of follower readiness. Each style is listed as having a higher probability of success if matched with the appropriate readiness level. Lesser degrees of success result as the leadership style is farther from the match of follower readiness. Hersey and Blanchard stressed the criticality in management’s ability to properly analyze and determine the appropriate style of leadership for the situation. They wrote:

The importance of a leader’s diagnostic ability cannot be overemphasized. In other words, managers must be able to identify clues in an environment. Yet even with good diagnostic skills, leaders may still not be effective unless they can adapt their leadership style to meet the demands of their environment. (p. 183)

Thus the development of Situational Leadership, defined as “there is no one best way to influence people. Which leadership style a person should use with individuals or groups depends

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on the readiness level of the people the leader is attempting to influence” (p. 185). These leadership styles are based on the level of task behaviors required, that is, “the extent to which the leader engages in spelling out the duties and responsibilities of an individual or group” (p. 185) and relationship behaviors identified as “the extent to which the leader engages in two-way or multi-way communication. The behaviors include listening, facilitating, and supportive behaviors” (1993, p. 187). The leadership style, according to Hersey and Blanchard, should then be chosen based on the level of readiness of the individual or group, as shown Appendix I.

A leadership style S4, identified as delegating, would most appropriately be matched with a follower readiness style R4. A leadership style S3, identified as participating, would most appropriately be matched with a follower readiness style R3 and so forth. The diagnostic and influencing skills of leadership are directly equated to the diagnostic and appropriate determination of measurements for a particular organization. An effective leader will diagnose his/her organization and influence it through the appropriate selection of measurements to steer towards the institution’s goals.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Goleman (1998), known for his work with emotional intelligence, is less known for his work with what it means for an organization to be emotionally intelligent. Goleman is adamant about the importance of any organization being in alignment with their vision and mission. While the development of an organization’s vision and mission have been heralded profusely in the last couple of decades and many institutions have joined the “band wagon” to create their vision and mission statement, there seems to be a disconnect between what leadership has espoused concerning what was important and the way business was actually done. Measurements are an important guide towards one’s vision, mission and values. “An emotionally intelligent

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organization needs to come to terms with any disparities between the values it proclaims and those it lives. Clarity about an organization's values, spirit, and mission leads to a decisive self-confidence in corporate decision making" (1998, p. 281). Goleman (1998) did not spare any words when he emphasized how important organizational measures are. In essence, the right measurements will bring success with the right leadership or else the organization will be fighting a losing battle.

Some of the most widely used organizational measures were assessed by the Personnel Resources and Development Center at the U. S. Office of Personnel Management, under the direction of Marilyn Gowing. The question: To what extent do these surveys assess emotional intelligence at the organizational level? There were, as Gowing puts it, 'some amazing gaps' in what was measured. These gaps point to missed possibilities in thinking about what makes an organization effective—and ways of diagnosing performance lapses. (p. 282)

The table in Appendix J identifies the gaps in organizations the survey revealed and the impact of such gaps. Emotional intelligence, as explained by Goleman (1998), is its ability to create value by solving problems.

In this sense, organizational intelligence represents that capacity as it emerges from the complex interplay of people and relationships, culture and roles with an organization. Knowledge and expertise are distributed within an organization, and no one person can master all the information the group needs to run efficiently—the financial officer has one type of key expertise, the salespeople another, those in research and development still another. The organization itself will only be as 'smart' as the timely and appropriate distribution and processing of these diverse elements of information. (p. 298)

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The more precise the measurements are to the heart of the organization, the better able the leaders will be to guide it with effective direction.

With the use of organizational emotional intelligence, the better leadership is able to discover those measurements that are not only pertinent to their specific institution, but will also be able to engage all stakeholders in the quest for performance excellence.

### **Measurements**

Part of the issue in the determination of which measurements are appropriate for any given organization is the difference in language between upper management and line employees. Senior leaders tend to speak and understand measurements from the point of view of the financial realm. They key into terms and concepts such as money, ratios, indexes, financial gain. Line workers tend to focus on terms or concepts such as number of products, elements, processes, and service (Juran, 1992). What is important to one group is not necessarily high on the list for the other. While management needs to know what the “bottom line” is in many cases, they also need to establish a way of measuring that is pertinent to those who will be collecting the measurements and have roll-up capability so they will be usable in the board room as well. Specific measurements that will continue to drive an organization toward excellence are elusive. One reason is that “customer’s needs keep changing. There is no such thing as a final list of customer’s needs” (Juran, 1992, p. 103). An innovative process, service or product of today will become the standard of tomorrow and will no longer excite the customer who now has a new set of expectations and needs. Whatever the units of measures have been or will be for an institution, Juran (1992) listed criteria for the ideal unit of measure. While described more in depth in his book, the six criteria for “the ideal unit of measure” are “1. It is understandable 2. It provides an agreed basis for decision making 3. It applies broadly 4. It is conducive to uniform interpretation

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5. It is economic to apply, and 6. It is compatible with existing designs of sensors” (pp. 124-125).

With these guidelines, leadership can proceed toward discovering those measurements which will be ideal for their institution.

### **Organizational Development and Human Resources**

It could easily be said that organizational development and leadership go hand-in-hand and what applies to one quite naturally applies to the other. However Broom, working for the Center for Human Resources, described organizational development in a unique and comprehensive way. His definition of the term was “Collaborating with organizational leaders and their groups to create systemic change and root-cause problem-solving on behalf of improving productivity and employee satisfaction through improving the human processes through which they get their work done” (n.d., para. 2). While it would seem that great leaders collaborate with others in the organization, what caught the eye in this definition is the focus on creating systemic change and doing root-cause analysis in order to improve productivity and satisfaction. Systemic change is been a commonly utilized term and should be elaborated upon to ensure greater understanding of how this study has viewed it.

According to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (1995), systemic change is defined as “change that occurs in all aspects and levels of the educational process and that affects all of the people included in this process--students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members” (para. 1). In other words, this type of change central to organizational development is a vibrant process that affects all stakeholders within and without an institution, graduates notwithstanding.

By looking for root-cause analysis of problems an organization can seek to systematically find ways to enhance productivity. Uncovering the root causes of problems enables organizations

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to find measurements that will drive them toward their vision and mission. Through the alignment of the work force toward very specific goals, an organization can rise above its peers. Senge (1990), in his classic, *The Fifth Discipline*, described the organizations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that will not only survive but excel. These will be the ones that become “learning organizations.” They will have mastered the five disciplines of “systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, and team learning” (pp. 375-376). These five disciplines along with their practices, principles, and essence are shown in Appendix K.

The model Senge presented was used to give a clearer picture of the inner workings of vital processes in organizations, as well as to show how these critical components interrelate. For example, in building a shared vision, there must be processes in place that not only allow for, but seek out the practices of sharing personal visions, listening to others and allowing the freedom to choose one’s own vision and the relationship of that vision to the vision of the organization. Recognizing and acknowledging the reality of the current situation is also a significant component to these practices. The interconnectedness is easily seen when viewing the practices, principles and essences of personal mastery. The practices within personal mastery include making choices and focusing on the current reality. The principles within this discipline include the creation of a personal vision. In this manner, each of the disciplines is interconnected and must be taught, strived for, and implemented within the learning organization with measurements as an integral part of the process.

In the development of organizational effectiveness and the search for the right type of measurements to drive an institution in that direction, a survey of over 1500 senior managers was commissioned by BNET. Watters (2007) wrote that chief executives got:

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Surprisingly high marks for ethics and standards of conduct, but suffer serious deficiencies as managers and leaders. CEO's toughest critics, business managers and executives, give their leaders high marks in many categories. CEOs got the worst marks from their direct reports judging them on social skills like the ability to inspire, be compassionate, and approachable. (para. 3-5)

This highlighted the suspicion that organizational development, as defined above, is not a common occurrence, and in fact, seems to be a rare entity in the majority of businesses today, including educational institutions. Of course, one might argue, what does having the ability to inspire, be compassionate and approachable have to do with collaboration for systemic change? Senge reminded us that we must have personal mastery as a part of building the learning organization. He (1990) identified the leader's role in fostering personal mastery in the following manner:

While embarking on a path of personal growth is a matter of choice, leaders can work relentlessly to foster a climate in which the principles of personal mastery are practiced in daily life. This means building an organization where it is safe for people to create visions, where inquiry and commitment to truth are the norm, and where challenging the status quo is expected—especially when the status quo includes obscuring aspects of current reality that people seek to avoid. Such an organizational climate will strengthen personal mastery in two ways. First, it will continually reinforce the idea that personal growth is truly valued in the organization. Second, to the extent that individuals respond to what is offered, it will provide an 'on the job training' that is vital to developing personal mastery. As with any discipline, developing personal mastery must become a continual, ongoing process. (p. 172)



### **Value of Teams**

Measurements are about getting results. Leadership is about getting results. Organizational behavior is about getting results. Human resources in the form of teams are a method that uses the measurements of the organizational behavior to obtain the results leaders want and need. Therefore it would seem that teams are critical in the development and implementation of key measurements in many institutions. Any study of measurement development without the researching of the value of teams would be negligent and incomplete. Byham (1998) insisted that in order for teams to be effective they “should be formed so they have a meaningful, measurable impact. A team that can’t continuously measure its accomplishments is not empowered” (p.157).

Since teams are a critical component to any company which has more than one employee, a method for teams to measure their results is vital to the health of the team and that organization. In other words, teams should be fully engaged in the dialogue of metric development and implementation. They need to know what to measure, how to measure and the “why” of measurement or in other terms, how that measurement will impact the results that are achieved for the organization (and for themselves as well). Teams should be taught the skills of data collection, analyzation, and implementation in order to continuously improve the work in their daily lives. This is “quality in daily work” (1991, p. 52) as Mary Walton described it in her document revealing how companies which are using the quality principles of Deming actually do the work at the line employee level. Six companies that achieved success through the embracing of Deming’s principles are shown to have made significant and impactful changes by their selective usage of teams. Multiple teams in the various companies were taken through specific systematic training that resulted in phenomenal improvements in numerous areas of business. As

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Walton (1991) described it, the teams were taught and “followed this seven-step analysis” (p. 49):

**Table 1 Seven Step Analysis Process**

1.	Reason for improvement:	To identify a theme (problem area) and the reason for working on it.
2.	Current situation:	To select a problem and set a target for improvement.
3.	Analysis:	To identify and verify the root causes of the problem.
4.	Countermeasures:	To plan and implement countermeasures that will correct the root causes of the problem.
5.	Results:	To confirm that the problem and its root causes have been decreased and the target for improvement has been met
6.	Standardization:	To prevent the problem and its root causes from recurring.
7.	Future plans:	To plan what is to be done about any remaining problems and to evaluate the team’s effectiveness.

*Note.* Adapted from “Deming management at work: Six successful companies that use the quality principle of the world-famous W. Edwards Deming,” by M. Walton. p. 49. Copyright 1991 by Perigee Books.

While the seven-step process was used extensively by the teams that followed the Deming principles, Deming actually taught a four-step process that was more widely known. His Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle which was discussed previously is one of the simplest methods for process improvement, yet there are many other methods with various steps. Walton described another method that some of the companies that were interviewed used. This method was actually a derivative of Deming’s PDCA., called FOCUS-PDCA and illustrated in table 2.

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**Table 2 FOCUS-PDCA Cycle**

<b>FOCUS-PDCA</b>	
<b>F</b>	Find a process to improve
<b>O</b>	Organize a team that knows the process
<b>C</b>	Clarify current knowledge of the process
<b>U</b>	Understand causes of process variation
<b>S</b>	Select the process improvement
<b>P</b>	Plan the improvement and continue data collection
<b>D</b>	Do the improvement, data collection, and analysis
<b>C</b>	Check the results and lessons learned from the team effort
<b>A</b>	Act to hold the gain and to continue to improve the process

*Note.* Adapted from “Deming management at work: Six successful companies that use the quality principle of the world-famous W. Edwards Deming,” by M. Walton. p. 109. Copyright 1991 by Perigee Books.

Regardless of the number of steps a process improvement cycle has in it, it is a methodology that will aid a team or individual in systematically drilling down to find the root causes of various problems/issues, thereby significantly enhancing the work and making it more productive and effective. Using teams in this manner may not necessarily help an organization delight their customer or uncover specific measurements that will propel the institution toward effectiveness, efficiency, or performance excellence, but it will certainly be a starting point for improvement for particular problems/issues. Processes such as the above mentioned seven-step analysis utilize data and countermeasures as an essential part of the discovery to target improvements and standardize them for future developments. And since measurements tend to be combined and “roll-up” in an organization to undergird the vital few at the top, this process is

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integral in the exploration and creation of the critical measurements important to the college or university interested in being student-centered and in their quest for performance excellence.

Teams are vital to all organizations and provide multiple benefits for the institution beyond what a collection of individuals can do. There may be greater energy and more resources available in teams which provide various viewpoints through suggestions and ideas as well as being an essential tool for leadership accountability. Maxwell (2001) gave a list of benefits for the use of teams, the two most insightful being “Teams provide multiple perspective on how to meet a need or reach a goal, thus devising several alternatives for each situation. Individual insight is seldom as broad and deep as a group’s when it takes on a problem” (p. 5). He also stated, “Teams keep leaders accountable for the goal. Individuals connected to no one can change a goal without accountability” (p. 5). The importance of teams and their relationship to the leaders of the organization cannot be overestimated. Their fundamental role in the development of measurements is crucial to positive performance and a growing institution. Individuals more readily have a voice on a team and the team provides the environment for growth, alignment, goal attainment, and meeting the graduates’ (i.e. customers’) needs.

### **Visioning**

Bill McDermott, Chief Executive Officer for SAP (Systems, Applications, and Products), with home office based in Germany, discussed how he turned around that software giant and described the first step as figuring out a big vision, as he called it, “an audacious vision, a vision that is almost limitless” (BNET, 2007, Video File). Mr. McDermott’s organization had over 6000 employees in North and South America, making it a very large “ship” to turn around. McDermott went on to say:

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The leader is also a strategist. It is not enough to just have your core competencies.

Strategy is understanding your markets, your competition, globalization, and the impact of economies... But more than anything, it is about reverse engineering, about what the customer wants and is likely to want... It is about creating a plan that is 100% focused on the customer. (BNET, 2007, Video File)

In the first hundred days of McDermott's leading the company, he assessed the leadership capacity of his thirteen direct reports. His focus was to determine which leaders had the capacity to reach the company's goals. After his first three months, only one direct report remained with the company. McDermott's philosophy in changing an organization direction to focus on performance excellence was to get people to follow his lead. He stated, "To get people to follow your lead requires you to actually change their mind. The most powerful thing a leader can do is to change minds" (BNET, 2007, Video File). He continued with the argument that the only way to make this type of change was to figure out what you are about and fully believe in your vision. "Be the change, be the leader, be the role model to build momentum" (BNET, 2007, Video File). It is important not to listen to the "noise" on the sidelines, because "if you listen to the negative noises, you will fail" (BNET, 2007, Video File). These noises are the nay-sayers around your vision, mission and strategy. This does not imply that the organization should not listen to their customer's feedback. On the contrary, Bill Gates stated that, "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning" (SPS, 2007, para. 1). It is vitally important to find out what your customers are saying.

While much has already been discussed concerning the development of a vision for an institution and the visioning process, the subject is of such importance as to require a section of its own. In as much as this literature review has dealt with student perceptions of performance

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excellence, which led to the related subjects of measurement and the development of measurements, it would seem a natural segue into the discussion of measuring one's vision.

At first glance, it would seem illogical to measure a vision since it is “the image that a business must have of its goals before it sets out to reach them” (Vadim Kotelnikov, 2001, para. 6). How does one measure an image or a concept? Maxwell gave a strong clue when he stated we must “check our compass.” Maxwell (2001) wrote, “How do you measure a vision? How do you know whether it is worthy and compelling? You check your compass. A team should examine the following six ‘compasses’ before embarking on any journey. A vision must be aligned with” (p. 92) the items listed in the checklist as shown in Appendix L. Maxwell’s use of the compass as a symbol was quite apparent. The symbol of a compass gives the visualization of an instrument which points in the direction we wish to go. Using the symbolic compass to measure our vision, Maxwell directed our focus with these six “compasses” and offered specific insight as to their use and their meaning. In this manner, we have been given a tool to measure that which has not normally been measurable. Not only has this been useful in this regard, but more importantly, it shows that with intuitive conceptualization, other measurements may be possible that may have not yet been discovered and could lead an organization toward performance excellence. As Maxwell (2001) revealed, “Vision gives team members direction and confidence. And when they have direction and confidence, the team is able to develop its potential and go to a whole new level” (p. 100).

Creating, establishing, and maintaining a vision for and within an organization is not easy. Jack Welch said, “Without question, communicating the vision, and the atmosphere around the vision, has been, and is continuing to be, by far, the toughest job we face” (as cited in Maxwell, 2001, p. 101). Whether or not it has been communicated and/or embraced, the vision

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could become a major part of the culture of every organization. Maxwell also stated that, “people need to be shown the team’s compass clearly, creatively, and continually. Whenever I endeavor to cast vision with the members of my team, I use the following checklist. I try to make sure that every vision message possesses...” (p. 101). The attributes are shown in Appendix M. The vision for any given institution, as Maxwell points out, is as critical as a rudder on a ship. Maxwell gave measurements for a vision as well as a checklist to keep that part of the strategic planning process, and indeed the whole institution, on course toward their chosen mission.

This literature review was intended to review those areas of study concerning customer service and performance excellence in institutions of higher learning and as they would be perceived by graduates from a selection of various colleges and universities. While not fully comprehensive, it was intended to review what could be construed as the primary issues that graduates who have completed at least their master’s level might perceive. The next chapter deals with the methodology of this study.

### **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology used in this research study. This chapter will discuss the sampling procedure, data collection method, design, indicators of this qualitative research, selection process, analytical process of the research method and demographic data.

#### **The Sampling Procedure**

Purposeful sampling was used with the criterion of graduates who had completed at least a master's level degree and had an interest in customer service and/or performance excellence. Snowball sampling led to graduates known to the researcher, other leaders and community members recommended by those interviewed, and a member of the American Society for Quality, who was discovered at a conference for the International Team Excellence Award. Maximum variation was sought, with no qualifying criteria for the type of educational background or involvement with any particular organizations. The sampling was one of convenience, drawing on individuals primarily located in the geographic center of the United States. Twenty graduates were interviewed' their demographic data is listed in chapter four. Additional questions were offered in the event clarification or a broadening of understanding was needed during the interview. Snowball sampling was used until the point of saturation was reached.

Determining the relative number of interview participants required in this research to reach saturation was more of an art than a science. Morse and Field (1995) used a purposeful sample of approximately ten participants in their phenomenological study (p. 208). Marshall (1996) suggested this may be an even smaller number: "An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question. For simple questions or



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very detailed studies, this might be in single figures” (p. 523). Kuzel (1999) also stated that “the sample size in a qualitative study is typically small—often between 5 and 20 units of analysis” (p. 34). But a more direct way to look at this issue was to make sure the focus was on what was being studied rather than the number of participants. As Patton (2002) revealed:

A decision maker is unlikely to say to the evaluator, ‘The unit of analysis we want to study is \_\_\_\_.’ The evaluator must be able to hear the real issues involved in the decision maker’s questions and translate those issues into the appropriate unit of analysis. (p. 229)

Therefore, the primary focus was to ensure the results produced rich, thick data for analysis whether the number of interviewees were a few more or a few less. Snowball sampling does not use a set number of interviews. Completion was achieved when themes re-occurred. Patton (2002) also stated:

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size will depend on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. (p. 244)

As Sandelowski (1995) declared:

Determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put, the particular research method and purposeful sampling strategy employed, and the research product intended. (p. 179)

In quoting Higginbottom, Salmon (2010) also added, “the sample size is not determined by the need to ensure generalizability, but by a desire to investigate fully the chosen topic and provide information-rich data (Higginbottom, 2004, p. 16)” (p. 97). In the final result in this study, as mentioned, twenty subjects were used in the interviews, the data was captured along with field

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notes of each encounter and member checks were accomplished whereby each interviewee reviewed his or her transcription.

The settings selected for the interviews were at the interviewee's discretion, with preference given first to their work location and secondarily to another discreet location if the first is not suitable, i.e., where the interview could be done without interruptions. The objective was to reduce the sense of intrusion into the life of the interviewee and to increase the sense of engagement on the part of the interviewee as much as possible.

The rationale for interviewing graduates stemmed from the premise that the more education individuals have, generally speaking, the more aware they are of the world around them and the more likely they will have perceptions of what or how to improve their world. Tinto (1997) stated, "Generally speaking, the greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills" (para. 4). He (1997) went on to say, "Quite simply, the more students invest in learning activities, that is, the higher their level of effort, the more students learn" (1997). Smith, Monro, and Bowen (2004), although talking about students in general, disclosed that "Most students of quality would agree with the late W. Edwards Deming, who said that at least 85 percent of quality problems result from management systems and can only be resolved through management action" (para. 13). This insight has led to the recognition, in part, that understanding systems helps manage issues such as customer service and performance excellence. Rice-Munro and Munro (2004) supported this reasoning when they stated:

Traditionally, education is the formal accumulation of knowledge about oneself and the world that enables an individual to function as a responsible citizen...Education also includes such activities as conferences, research, dialogue, observation and the like. As a

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primary outcome of training, a person should learn something new or improve upon what he or she already knows. Thus, learning is a relatively permanent change in a person's knowledge or behavior due to experience. (para. 6-7)

The participants selected for this study initially were individuals from the state of Kansas or a surrounding state. Later participants included others from the larger area of the Midwest. They were master's level graduates or others who had continued their education. Their fields of study included curriculum and instruction, educational leadership, educational administration, human resource development, science and management, business administration, history, adult and continuing education, business management, microbiology and immunology, healthcare administration, and mechanical engineering. Graduates listed their universities from California to Massachusetts and included the states of Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, as well as online institutions.

### **The Data Collection Method**

Data was collected through an interview process and each participant was given an opportunity to select a location that was convenient for him or her. Interviews were initiated with an attempt to try to establish rapport and an attitude of naturalness. After a brief discussion of the background and purpose of the study, the interviewees were asked semi-structured and open-ended questions as listed in Appendix C. As the interview progressed, clarification was sought and additional questions spontaneously arose. Sixty to ninety minutes were set aside for each interview with the mean interview time being 54.6 minutes.

Each participant was asked to complete a short list of demographic questions, read and sign the waiver shown in Appendix A, and informed that the interview would be audio recorded. Demographics requested included the graduate's (interviewee's) level of satisfaction with prior

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college or university. Satisfaction has long been utilized as demographic (Athiyaman, 1996, Hallowell, 1996, Mittal & Kamakura, 2001, Swan, 2001). Demographics also included the level of education, length of time since graduating, grade point average, gender, age (range), race, and degree specialty. These particular demographics were selected in order to better understand the population used for the interviews. The set of questions on demographics is listed in Appendix B. Each participant was allowed to continue at whatever pace was comfortable for the interviewee. The purpose was to discover from a graduate's standpoint what it took for a college or university to provide appropriate customer service or performance excellence. Through the data collection and analysis of the graduate's feedback, the expectation was to develop a deeper understanding of how masters' and doctorate level program graduates perceived their chosen institutions' strategy around customer (student) centered desires and needs. Further expectations were hoped to be revelations from the graduates of some type of student-centered measurements that would most likely be developed in positively influencing colleges and universities toward a common goal of increased customer satisfaction. The interview questionnaire was approved through the KSU Institutional Review Board. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with the first five interviewees to obtain feedback from them, as well as reviewing and analyzing the data collected for content and improvements in the interviewing process. These initial five did participate in the actual study since the interview guide was not changed based on any outcome of the pilot study. The process of seeking feedback for continually improving the interviewing process was sustained through the ninth interviewee, until the author was assured that the methods employed, including the interpersonal skills, did not detract but rather added value to the questioning practice.

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Methods of confirmation of the data analyzation, as mentioned, were field notes, member checks, and triangulation. Triangulation was accomplished through memoing, field notes, and member checks. Reflective field notes of the interviews were compiled as soon after the interviews were conducted as possible, both before and after the pilot study to aid in triangulation. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that “Triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in question” (p. 5).

### **The Design**

Deming, in *Three Experts on Quality Management*, has been credited with emphasizing that only the customer can truly determine if a process, survey method, questionnaire or other means of collecting data is of value (Three Experts on Quality Management, 1992, p. 9). The customer of this qualitative study will determine its credibility. This has been the primary rationale for completing feedback checks with the participants and ensuring field notes were completed as soon as possible after interviews were conducted. The primary research question asked in the pursuit of further understanding graduates’ perceptions of customer service was, “What were graduate perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning?” To answer this question, additional sub-questions needed to be answered. These sub-questions included:

1. What did graduates think about customer service and performance excellence prior to beginning their advanced degrees?
2. What do graduates think about customer service and performance excellence after completing their degrees?

The method employed was a basic interpretive qualitative study in which the researcher constructed reality in the interaction with the social world. “Research focused on discovery,

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insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Data was collected through interviews, observations, and field notes. The basic goal for qualitative researchers was "in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). To reiterate, this research design was a basic interpretive qualitative study using constant comparisons and triangulation through field notes and field notes. The study's limitations were discussed in chapter one.

The characteristics of this study sought to follow qualitative research methodology and may be described as "oriented toward discovery, its purpose is understanding, it uses subjective data, it extracts meaning from the whole, it interprets results in context, and it is holistic in focus" (Key, 1998, p. 8). These characteristics led to several advantages which include:

...in-depth examination of phenomena, it can use subjective information, it is not limited to rigidly definable variables, it can examine complex questions that can be impossible with quantitative methods, it deals with value-laden questions, it can explore new areas of research, and it can build new theories. (Key, 1998, p. 9)

Unfortunately, these same characteristics can lead to some disadvantages. This research would be remiss if it did not address these as well. These could have included the possibility of:

...subjectivity leading to procedural problems, replicability being very difficult, researcher's bias is built-in and unavoidable, the in-depth, comprehensive approach to data gathering limits scope, it can be labor intensive and expensive, and finally, it is not well understood by 'classical' researchers. (Key, 1998, p. 10)

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As qualitative research, this study had as its core purpose a determination to help people deepen their understanding about a particular subject. It sought out deepening one's perception around an issue of concern rather than counting or classifying features. Patton (2002) stated that:

Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry. The advantages of a qualitative approach are that it typically produces a wealth of detailed information about a smaller number of people and cases. This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability. (p. 14)

### **The Role of the Interviewer**

Merriam (2009) has told us that there are four characteristics that are critical to understanding the structure of qualitative research. These have been: "the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (p. 14). As the focus was on understanding a phenomenon and making meaning from the interviewee's perspective, it was vital for the researcher to recognize that the insights gained from this study would come primarily from the graduates who were being interviewed. It was also imperative for the researcher to be aware "that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). The researcher is the observer; Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world" (p.3). With this in mind, the researcher sought to situate himself in the

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interviewee's world to understand how he or she perceived customer satisfaction and performance excellence.

Merriam (2009) explained the importance of the researcher in qualitative research. She stated:

The human element is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive and would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data. Other advantages are understanding through nonverbal and well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses. (p.15)

Therefore, it was vital that the researcher was intensely aware of his influence and obtained the necessary communication skills to ensure the data retrieved from the interviewee was as accurate and complete as possible.

It was also imperative that the researcher's characteristics included being inductive and being sensitive to inferences that might lead to further insight. As Merriam (2009) stated, "there is a lack of theory. Therefore, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypothesis, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research" (p, 15). One of the researcher's roles included that of being an auditor and being keenly aware of all aspects of the interview. This included the physical setting, the mood of the interviewee, his/her tone of voice, pace, attitude, and so on, in order to describe the conditions and the data collected as accurately as possible. This was accomplished through memoing and field notes by the researcher immediately following each interview. Merriam (2009) informed us that the end result of a qualitative study is strongly descriptive. What the researcher learned about a given phenomenon has been translated through words and pictures (p. 16).



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The researcher's role, then, was: to determine the subject matter to review; develop the interview question set for graduates to be interviewed; and complete a thorough analysis of the data gathered. Furthermore, the researcher completed a literature review of multiple aspects relating to students' perceptions of performance excellence, how the data was gathered, the analysis and results of the study, as well as to develop the methodology of the study. The data collection method, the indicators in qualitative research, the selection process, and the analytical process of the research method were reviewed. Moreover, the researcher's role was to: ensure minimum bias in the procurement of information from the interviews; appropriately accomplish field notes; analyze the data through various means including triangulation; and describe the findings.

### **Credibility and Transferability in this Research**

There has been much discussion and debate over the role of quantifying qualitative research. Qualitative research methodology does not lend itself to the same type of rigors that other research does. Merriam (2002) stated that there is "debate and discussion in the literature and at conferences as to how to think about validity and reliability in qualitative research" (p. 24). This subject was explored to ensure that this study was completed in a rigorous manner. Any reader will want to know how this study was accomplished and if it -- as well as the results -- can be trusted. The main question, then, concerning credibility, transferability, and dependability in qualitative research was how to persuade the reader that the findings are worthy of the effort of the research and that it is worth paying attention to the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

What remains, then, is to identify how the characteristics of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability relate specifically to this qualitative research. Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen, & Spiers (2002) described the process in the following terms:

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These mechanisms are woven into every step of the inquiry to construct a solid product (Creswell, 1997; Kvale, 1989) by identifying and correcting errors before they are built in to the developing model and before they subvert the analysis. If the principles of qualitative inquiry are followed, the analysis is self-correcting. In other words, qualitative research is iterative rather than linear, so that a good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis. Data are systematically checked, focus is maintained, and the fit of data and the conceptual work of analysis and interpretation are monitored and confirmed constantly. Verification strategies help the researcher identify when to continue, stop or modify the research process in order to achieve reliability and validity and ensure rigor. (para. 29)

The direction for data collection was adapted in this vein and the process to ensure reliability in the proposed collection sources was initiated. The results of this research were offered to the interviewees to ensure their engagement in the process. Memoing -- in addition to affective field notes -- aided the process of capturing not only what the interviewee said, but also what the feelings and insights of the researcher were immediately following the interview. This was an important step in validating the credibility of the study. Trochim (2006) emphasized this when he stated:

The credibility criteria involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research. Since from this perspective, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. (para. 3)

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Thus, credibility, first in the participants; eyes and then in other readers', was vital to establishing trustworthiness in this quantitative study. Additionally, credibility should be the primary domain of those who were interviewed for this research.

Transferability in this research was sought in the ability to extract findings and transfer them to another area of interest. Transferability, as the word implies, is the extent to which this research may be transferred or generalized to other educational institutions or departments.

Again, Trochim's (2006) input on this was:

From a qualitative perspective transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing. The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is. (para. 4)

Therefore, the researcher bore the greatest burden of transferability, primarily determined by the extent to which the contexts of the research (and any assumptions) were fully described.

Dependability was sought in this research through rich, thick data and described or illustrated through the in-depth interview transcriptions revealing quotes from the participants and discussed in the next chapter. Oka and Shaw (2000, para. 7-8) confirmed that:

Dependability is the qualitative researcher's equivalent of replicability. In quantitative research, reliability means that the same tests should produce the same results. For qualitative researchers, this kind of replicability is impossible to realize because the research design is so flexible and the research findings are produced by constantly changing interactions between researchers and participants. Therefore, as Guba and Lincoln (1989) state, 'Far from being threats to dependability, such changes and shifts are

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hallmarks of a maturing - and successful - inquiry. But such changes and shifts need to be both tracked and trackable (publicly inspectable)'. (p. 242)

In other words, the goal of dependability in this research was such that others could follow the actions taken and retrieve similar results, even though some change in the results would likely happen and was to be expected.

And finally, confirmability in this research was shown through the transparency of the methodology. This was generally seen as how something can be confirmed without distortion due to personal feelings, prejudice, or interpretation (Merriam-Webster, 2008). Confirmability, then, was described as the extent to which the researcher was unbiased or neutral with regard to personal feelings, prejudice, or interpretation. Hoepfl (1997, para. 68), in quoting Lincoln and Guba wrote:

Lincoln and Guba (1985) choose to speak of the 'confirmability' of the research. In a sense, they refer to the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate the neutrality of the research interpretations, through a 'confirmability audit.' This means providing an audit trail consisting of 1) raw data; 2) analysis notes; 3) reconstruction and synthesis products; 4) process notes; 5) personal notes; and 6) preliminary developmental information. (pp. 320-321)

Confirmability, then in this research, was used as the method of providing inventory or review of the research process of so that the steps taken could be duplicated and any who wish to appraise the study or its results would have a clear path to do so.

### **The Analytical Process of this Study**

The process of analyzing the data to be recovered from the participants (interviewees) was one of sorting the information through coding, which is the use of labels to classify and

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assign meaning to pieces of data. Thematic analysis was accompanied by the process of field notes. This technique of keeping field notes was used by the researcher to record reflective notes of what was being learned from the data and from the interview.

The interview questions were open-ended; there could be a multiple number of answers in a myriad of areas. The respondents were asked the research questions listed in the appendix and these questions were used to guide the process in gathering data directly or from ancillary questions drawn from the interviewees' responses.

As common themes were identified, they were categorized and analyzed to determine if there were any relationships. The demographics as listed in Appendix C were analyzed and discussed in chapter four. For dependability, this research sought thick, rich data by including quotes from interviewees.

The data was first transcribed by an outside source and then analyzed; it was divided into meaningful units or segments which were inductively coded. The coded segments were further reviewed for common symbols and/or descriptive words and categorized. During the coding, a master list was kept and reapplied to new segments of data each time an appropriate segment was encountered. Weft Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) was also used to assist in coding as it was relatively simple to use, open source, freeware, and had the desired features to complete the coding for this study. Weft QDA (Fenton, 2006) is described as:

An easy-to-use tool to assist in the analysis of textual data such as interview transcripts, written texts and field notes. It includes a number of fairly standard CAQDAS features:

- Import documents from plain text or PDF
- Character-level coding using categories organized in a tree structure
- Category and document memos

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- Retrieval of coded text and ‘coding-on’
- Simple coding statistics
- Fast free-text search
- Combine coding and searches using Boolean queries: AND, OR, AND NOT
- ‘Code Review’ to compare the coding of multiple categories
- Export to HTML and CSV formats
- Single-file (\*.qdp) project format
- Available FREE on Windows under a public domain license (para. 1)

After the researcher marked some of the data with categories, he reviewed each of the document sections and coded them side-by-side by a category. This allowed comparisons to see what the categories had in common, and how they differed. The software offered the ability to apply further categories to text sections. This was very useful in developing an analysis. The procedure for coding text within a category was similar to coding a source document directly. That is, the category was selected, then coded, and finally the text sections selected were marked (Fenton, 2006). Hand coding was accomplished in conjunction with the utilization of the Weft QDA software as a cross-check to offer support of the analysis. No software can replace the human element in coding passages; it can only assist in the quick retrieval of passages already coded and compile similar entries for quick review.

What this research sought first and foremost was determining how graduates perceive customer service in institutions of higher learning. Since graduates are considered primary customers (Wallace, 1999) or former customers (Sirvanci, 1996) of colleges and universities, they were a source of information on continuous improvement techniques and performance excellence

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processes for the organizations. In turn, the findings of this research could be of benefit to many types of organizations besides education.

The analyzation of the interviews, field notes, and triangulation is reserved for the next chapter.

### CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This chapter introduces the 20 interviewees who participated in this study, their characteristics and the findings regarding the perceptions of the graduates concerning their views of customer service in institutions of higher learning. The common themes and findings for the two research questions in this study are presented using quotations from the interview transcripts.

#### **Characteristics of the Participants**

The sample of interviewees who participated in this study consisted of 8 women and 12 men. Ten held a master's degree and 10 held a doctorate degree. Their alma maters were universities from California to Massachusetts and included Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, in addition to online institutions. The majority of the universities were from the Midwestern states. Sixteen participants were highly satisfied with their degree granting institutions, 3 were satisfied, and one was neutral in listing their satisfaction with their educational institution. The mean grade point average was 3.88 with a range of 3.6 to 4.0. The mean number of years since degree completion was 11.0 years with the range from one year to more than 20 years. This indicated that there was substantial work force experience which would equate to over 200 years. The mean age of the participants was 48.5 with a range between 30 years and 65 years. Additionally, 19 of the participants were Caucasians and one was an American Indian. The average time for the interview was 54.6 minutes. A partial listing of the demographics to aid in understanding various viewpoints is given in Appendix O.

The participants contributed enough information that when transcribed was almost 200 single-space typewritten pages. This material was subsequently placed in the Weft QDA program for further analysis, which is shown in the following section. Whenever a specific college or university was named in the interview or an individual's name or other distinguishing



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feature was used, it is transcribed as two or more “Xs,” both to preserve anonymity and to protect the institution(s), or it is identified as *city* or *name* in italics. The quotes are listed by “E” representing the interviewee and by “R” representing the interviewer.

### **Common Themes in the Study**

The common themes regarding the two research questions addressed in this study emerged during the interviews. The Weft QDA program was chosen to assist in analyzing the data after the transcripts were completed. As Fenton (2006) said, “it is a software tool for the analysis of textual data such as interview transcripts, documents and field notes” (p. 1). While this study offered a certain amount of quantitative data in the demographics and in the content analysis, the primary analysis approach was in the qualitative dimension.

Themes revealed during this research revolved around characteristics of customer service and performance excellence from the interviewees’ perspective. These themes included an emphasis on the importance of certain qualities or attributes in ensuring positive customer service and performance excellence. The attributes discovered in the analysis of the data in order of importance to the interviewees included: competency, providing guidance, measurements, relationship building, values, being responsive, being available, having a support system, empathy, being consistent, and the aspects of being trustworthy, credible, loyal, and following through. The last set of aspects was considered as one attribute. Each of these attributes came about through analyzing passages from the various transcripts, coding the passages and combining similar characteristics to form an overarching title listed as one attribute. Specific examples are shown in Appendix P. Each of these attributes will be reviewed in light of the interviewees’ perspectives in the findings that follow.

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A listing partially describing each interviewee was made to aid the reader in better understanding the context of each participant's comments. This listing can be found in Appendix P.

### **A focus on customer satisfaction and performance excellence and their differences.**

Computer aided software indicated that there were 386 times that the term "customer" was discussed, 411 times the term "satisfaction" was discussed, and 346 times that the term "performance excellence" was discussed during the 20 interviews. At first glance, this may not seem to be uncommon. After all, this was research about those particular subjects. There was no one who turned down the request to do an interview on this particular subject. This in itself is somewhat surprising considering people's busy schedules and personal focus. Yet each of the 20 persons asked was very willing to join in this study and several of them were recommended by earlier interviewees.

The focus on customers and satisfaction branched out into other areas as discussed later in this chapter. Although it may be obvious, what is perceived as good customer service has an impact on the bottom line of an institution. For instance, interviewee 01 commented about customer service this way: "There are universities around that believe they are going to get their share of the students regardless and they don't have to really pay much attention to customer service, or at least that is how they act."

Further in the discussion, the same interviewee revealed another aspect resulting from his perceived good customer service. He stated, "So, when xxx calls for money, I usually give. When xxxx calls for money, I'll never give;" (Interviewee 01) was referring to two universities that he had attended. Another subject offered this insight into positive customer service:

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From the standpoint of customer service, I found xxx to be helpful, the people to be friendly. I have recommended it to a lot of people. The people got you the information that you needed. They tried to provide good customer service. They tried to answer your questions. (Interview 03)

This subject explained in his own words what good customer service meant to him. He used terms like “helpful,” “friendly,” “getting the information needed,” “not having to repeat information,” and “answering your questions.” Another subject (08) added this, “It was great. Customer service was fantastic. I would say for it being a large university, I never felt like I was a number.” The quality of being significant even in the midst of a large group of people was a common thread that many of the subjects hinted at or discussed outright while speaking about customer service.

In reviewing the researcher’s field notes, as each subject’s interview was reviewed and thoughts recorded within twenty-four hours, the field notes interview subject (FNIS) revealed additional data on the perceptions of customer service. The first example was, “He did discuss bonding and relationships as an important part of good customer service and performance excellence. He was very affable, sincere, and had a passion in his voice when talking about his last alma mater” (FNIS 01). Another example showed an interviewee expressing his negative experience from several years ago:

He stated that the university official in addressing his new class first said to them that "one-third of you will not pass, and the other two-thirds will earn the grade you get." He remembers distinctly the impression that left and the negative connotation that was presented to him at the start of his advanced degree. (FNIS 11)

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Another made comparisons as well as to what had happened to him versus when he enrolled his son into college:

He also compared insights to when he started his master's degree to attending a university more recently to enrolling his kids into college. He felt the current administration was very customer oriented and much more focused on what the parents' needs were in addition to providing the student an excellent educational environment. (FNIS 12)

In these instances, it seems that establishing positive communication and establishing a friendly atmosphere had a major impact on how these individuals perceived customer service from different universities.

Good customer service seems to be elusive. The next subject attended two universities and had two entirely different experiences:

My impressions of customer service were really dreadful. I would never go back there and I would never recommend anybody else go back there. I thought the quality of education was good, but the dog-eat-dog attitude pervaded throughout the experience. At xx, the experience was totally different. I would recommend anybody go through that program. And I really felt that at xx, they wanted you to succeed. Whereas at xxx, the first thing they said was, "Don't get comfortable with the person next to you because half of you will be gone at the end of the year. (Interviewee 16)

One aspect this passage brings up is the difference between various facets of university life and how that difference affects perceived customer service. The previous passage differentiates between the education imparted by instructors and supplementary aspects, such as the administration and other supporting facilities. Customer service qualities can be observed in one department or college and not in the next, or it can be present at a particular university and then

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quickly removed, as one subject describes. “Customer service was fantastic, in all areas of financial, educational, and administrative. At three years into the degree, they sold the school to a for-profit organization and from there customer service declined rapidly and is extremely bad now” (Interviewee 10). In regards to one department being perceived as having great customer service and the next one not having it, subject 13 offers the following insight.

I would say no matter what institution (I’ve been at a number now) and no matter what institution you’re at, you will always find pockets of people who really have no clue what customer service means and don’t care to deliver it. On the flip side of that, you will find pockets of people who really go out of their way and it’s really a mission to have good customer service. Any time I was having problems, I kind of knew who to go to. And, I kind of knew the questions to ask to find out where to go next. (Interviewee 13)

A point of interest from this discussion was the importance of knowing where to find the answers needed for a given situation in institutions of higher learning and the value of knowing the right questions to ask to help direct one’s journey. Some of the subjects indicated the consequence of universities/professors being available and willing to take time for the customer (the student) as relayed next:

One of the first things everyone (instructors) did was put their home phone number up on the board and sometimes they would say, “don’t call between the hours of 1 am and 5 am unless you really got something important,” or some restriction like that. Usually it was just call if you got a question...Which, my worst experience, in calling to several different civilian universities where it is pretty much...your big conference hall, 500 students, sink or swim we don’t much care...So, my impression of academia is it is very

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research oriented and they don't really care about the students. "You guys just go figure it out." So, that was kind of my impression going through. (Interviewee 19)

The perceptions this subject described showed a concern for the customer in the first illustration through the instructor being available, whereas the second illustration showed the lack of concern for the customer who was simply one of many from the university's point of view.

In reviewing performance excellence with the interviewees, the following insights were uncovered as these subjects gave their definition as stated, "The instructors adopted the performance excellence (*focus*) of we turn out graduates that can survive in a business setting" (Interviewee 16). Another had this to say:

Performance Excellence is how well you do your job. How well do you take care of... You know, how well do you produce... My perception of how Higher Ed. should be run is probably different than most because I come from the retail background which is customer driven, sales driven, and it kind of comes back to the old saying of what we used to call, "Surprise and delight." (Interviewee 13)

While there were many participants who gave their definitions of performance excellence and customer service, the pervading theme seemed to be one of delighting the customer, meeting their needs, and having a system to focus on the overall quality of output and improvement. One other example is:

Well, I see the customer service part as being responsive to the needs and anticipating needs and knowing what your customer requirements are, having done your, um, market research, or whatever. Performance excellence could provide great customer service but the outcomes are still not good. They could have excellent customer service and help you with enrolling in the process but they may have teachers that aren't giving a good

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education or the coursework isn't challenging. Then performance excellence will suffer because the rest of the program isn't at the same level as the customer requirements.

(Interviewee 17)

Defining performance excellence and customer service from another perspective, this subject made the following statement:

Customer service now, my definition would be catering to the student's needs and really not devising a program that other people must stick to but fitting your program to the needs of the students and making individual programs to fit their specific needs. I think that is a big difference to what I have seen over the years...Performance excellence would be setting high expectations and then helping students meet those high expectations... Having high expectations, it helps just that we are going to do everything we can to make you successful, to help you get to that point. (Interviewee 11)

This same subject reflects on when he first went through as a graduate student and what his perceptions of customer service were then as opposed to what they are today.

The first orientation that we went to, basically the statement was made, I remember to this day; about a third of you won't make it...So what a drastic difference to seeing how that's been and in my most recent degree, not hours, but past it, even the degree program has seen some change over the number of years being out of that. At that time, it was pretty much some weed out classes again that were geared at eliminating certain populations and doing that. To now, seeing institutions making, a lot more making it customer friendly and taking hours online, taking hours when you want to have them. They are catering to the student needs a lot more. Could there be gains made? Probably

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but boy it has been a lot more still, a lot better experiences for people going through it now. (Interviewee 11)

And another subject had this to say about performance excellence in higher education:

Performance excellence, I think the professors I dealt with were knowledgeable and had experience in schools. I would say that a couple of them at least were pretty much old school and maybe had not adapted as much to the changes...They have been behind the walls of institutions. They were not as progressive as I would have anticipated at that particular point and time. (Interviewee 07)

This same subject followed up these statements with, "I have not kept in close contact with either institution...Their customer service was fine, but I think just in terms of performance excellence, I think in some cases they were behind the times" (Interviewee 07).

Perceptions recovered from those interviewed indicate a growing awareness of customer service focus and performance excellence needs for the institutions.

Several interviewees offered what they perceived as differences in customer service, either between one department or college and the next, or between universities, or even between one time and another within the same institution.

One subject added to this the differences perceived between two universities. Although the passage is a bit lengthy, it seems to clarify her perceptions and some major differences.

E: I was in a program where you had to have five years of working experience, and everything is done in a team format. So when I was admitted, my application went to several of the professors before I was admitted into the program. And so they knew what I could do before I walked in the door. The first thing we did was we divide up into different teams in the different classes; so I never worked with the same people and you



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would be paired with somebody. You'd do class activities with somebody in a group, to do papers in a business setting in a group. And the only thing we did separately, for the most part, was testing. And I think that really parallels more closely with what the business world is like.

R: So at xx, in other words, it sounds like the focus was elsewhere and not on the students. They were not customer centered at all, not like xxx?

E: That's true. That's true. And at xxx, it was pretty much centered on the students. I know that the professors had graduate programs that they were also working on and they had graduate students...There were opportunities had I wanted to work on my PhD there.

R: So it sounds like practical experience there?

E: Actually, to be honest, I think that xxx was totally practical. Now don't get me wrong, there were academics there...There were pieces of the curriculum that had customer service in it like in my statistics class there was a module on customer service and the statistics that were behind evaluating customer service.

R: It sounds to me, if I could synthesize a little bit, the teaching of customer service was emphasized through or in collaboration. Would you agree with that?

E: Yes.

R: And that was strong in the second university and lacking in the first?

E: Very much. Yes, you got it. (Interviewee 16)

As passages were reviewed, an interesting insight emerged that indicated several of the participants would look inward when discussing performance excellence from their educational institutions. A couple of examples follow:

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They need to know that I'm trustworthy. If I say I'll get back to them, I'll get back to them. If I make a promise, I better be willing to back that up. Or, if I say, this is what I'm going to do, I need to back that up. I think there is also simple things. You need to remain personal if at all possible. When I answer the phone, I try to say my name. When I send an email, I try to put my phone number with it. If it's an outside person, there are kindnesses and being true to my word; those are really the biggest things that have to happen. It's the golden rule. (Interviewee15)

and from another source:

As I said at xxx, sometimes I would get so frustrated because I didn't know who to ask. So I think that accessibility is vital, and I try to model that. I teach and I do it in my workplace, in my job. I feel it is pretty important to be close to my staff...and I feel that as an instructor at xxx that that is very, very important. (Interviewee 18)

The implications of the dual view of looking inward and the perceptions of the institution's performance excellence will be discussed in chapter five.

### **Differences perceived prior and post graduation.**

In many cases, subjects report being initially unaware, unknowledgeable, and sometimes even unconcerned about performance excellence from their chosen institution of higher learning and their perceptions of customer service seemed to follow this pattern as well. In other cases, especially if they were seeking their doctorate, they seemed to have a better understanding of what specific needs they had and what expectations they could reasonably realize from their chosen university, as seen in the following passages. Participant 05 said, "I don't ever remember thinking of students as customers, both as an employee of the university and as a graduate student." Interviewee 08 echoed his perceptions before starting his advanced degrees, "My

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expectations were nothing. I didn't know to have expectations." Another participant repeated this line when he said, "I didn't know much about it at the time. I know a lot about it now"

(Interviewee 14).

The next subject's experiences negatively affected his perceptions of customer service and performance excellence from his chosen universities in some areas, as shown in the following passage.

R: Did you see any perception of change from the beginning to the end of that?

E: It actually got worse, but let me also state that when I first started going to school to work on my master's degree, my master's degree in *city*, I tried to enroll at xxx, but that was such a nightmare in that office that halfway through the process of trying to enroll, I just walked away from the university and said I wasn't going to school there. It was absolutely crazy...Well let's go back to the degree at xx. You know my experiences there were very good. The enrollment with the administration and education, it was all a real good experience...At xxx working on a PhD in Business Administration, going to school there for five years, and the first three years were excellent. Customer service was fantastic, in all areas of financial, educational, and administrative. At three years into the degree, they sold the school to a for-profit organization and from there customer service declined rapidly and is extremely bad now. (Interviewee 10)

Interestingly, interviewee 10 had stated in his demographics that he was "highly satisfied" with his degree-granting institution. His "nightmare" experiences were with institutions at which he had tried to enroll or in programs that were not yet completed.

Those interviewed in the following sections had much to say about customer service and performance excellence and their attributes.

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### **Perceived importance of customer service and performance excellence.**

Each of the subjects, when asked, indicated a strong belief that customer service and performance excellence were vitally important to the health and welfare of any institution. Industry, it seems, has a fairly good grasp on the subject and how to implement this for the benefit of customers as well as the bottom line. However, education - at least from the perspective of the interviewees - had sporadic emphasis with mixed results. The following excerpt is an example of this.

Well, the nuts and bolts of it is that customer service is probably the most important thing we can do in order to service both our internal and external customers and performance excellence is an overarching goal we want to strive for. That's the nutshell version of it...Customer service, pretty much relates from quality principles in order to either gain market share, service the customer better, and just improve just your dealings with the public and in-house. As far as performance excellence, it's a standard by which many either individuals or companies mostly aren't aware of or embrace. And, a lot of times when they do embrace things such as try to do better customer service practices or say they are on a performance excellence kick or continuous improvement journey—the rubber doesn't always meet the road. So, when you examine organizations, you find there is a great disparity in what their definition or idea of customer service or even performance excellence might be versus standards or ideals that you or I may have learned from our exposure to the arena of quality. (Interviewee 20)

Each of the participants indicated a firm conviction in the value of customer service and the importance of performance excellence. What follows are the attributes of customer service and performance excellence from the eyes of those interviewed.

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### **Competency as integral to customer service.**

The first attribute to be discussed, as revealed in the interviews, is one to which the most passages have been coded. This attribute was coded to 146 passages, more than any other (see Appendix Q.) This overarching attribute is competency. This attribute is revealed through the knowledge and skill of those serving the customers. One participant identified the importance of competency in this way, “You expected, you know, competent instructors” (Interviewee 05). The subjects spoke of the topic of knowledge in the following manner:

I don't want my time to be wasted. I want reasonable expectations for the course work, and projects, and papers. And I expect faculty that are engaging and knowledgeable and accommodating and that to some extent will share my career goals, will share my...

My aspirations or at least acknowledge at some point, hey, job well done. Let's work together to make sure you get where you need to be. You get the knowledge base, tools, and the skills to be successful. That's what any teacher does but I don't think that's not always the mindset of the university professor or university administrator. (Interviewee 03)

And, “It was kind of very much ah, they are the ones that got all the knowledge and you're the one there to learn from them and, you know, even the idea of when you get to class”

(Interviewee 05). Other subjects perceived the relationship between customer service, performance excellence and knowledge in this way:

I think the professors I dealt with were knowledgeable and had experience in schools, public schools. I would say that a couple of them at least were pretty much old school and maybe had not adapted as much to the changes. (Interviewee 07)

and

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I think I approached the MBA program just thinking excellence means me getting a degree. I think during the program, it changed for me that how I was internalizing things, what am I using for this program. How am I changing stuff at my own company, my own farm, because of this knowledge? How am I working differently? It really caused me to grow up in a way that I didn't see. (Interviewee 08)

and, "I expected that they would provide me with the knowledge I would need...I expected to learn a great deal from them and that they would be experts in my field so that I could learn from them" (Interview 09).

On the topic of skill as it relates to competency, customer service and performance excellence, these subjects had the following perceptions:

My expectations of that would be that when I came out of grad school that I would be very prepared to meet the challenges...I would come out with a good repertoire of skills, abilities, to jump right into a position that would enable me to do that. (Interviewee 11)

and,

Now in this day of changing with the tight economy, the number of employers offering tuition remission is growing smaller and they expect their employees to come in with all the gadgets, with the skill level and not develop them. Twenty years ago, the employer wanted to develop skills. Now they don't. (Interviewee 14)

and, "I'm looking for performance and so, in my mind, performance of professors in the universities is having the students learn certain skills and abilities that they gain that they didn't have starting" (Interviewee 19).

Nineteen of the 20 participants interviewed discussed some characteristic of this attribute and it was emphasized more than any other attribute. From this study, participants believed this

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to be the most important attribute in creating positive customer satisfaction and performance excellence.

### **Perceptions on providing the necessary guidance.**

Providing the necessary guidance for the customer in higher education is another critical skill that seemed to be present in various degrees, depending on the university, department, or personality. The following subjects weigh in on this topic, “Well, I had been ABD three different times in this program...My advisor, and he was a great professor, incredibly entertaining, incredibly bright, but not a very good advisor. He never gave me any direction” (Interviewee 01).  
and

I felt like I didn't really get guidance. It was more a case of, I had to pull it out of my head, and I didn't know what he was looking for. I felt like I spent too much time confused or frustrated and not enough time being guided. (Interviewee 13)

and

I think it is important that we leave things better than what we found them. But how do we...going back to how do we do that and how do we measure it? I think there is a real gap in many universities now in teaching guidance...And we need to explain to people that part of what we all need are guidance and boundaries and we need to be told what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. (Interviewee 19)

There were four attributes revealed from every one of the participants of this study that were critical to positive customer service and performance excellence. This attribute of providing guidance was at the top of that list. It was identified by all 20 participants and described 125 times throughout the course of the interviews. This was the second highest scoring attribute of all those uncovered through this research and relating to the core subject.

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### **Perceptions of the importance of measurements.**

The criticality of measuring what is important to an organization as a way of creating and maintaining positive customer service and performance excellence became visible during the interview process and during the reflection of it through field notes. The following remarks support this proposition.

I think the thing that I learned is you need to always measure. It's always very important.

There was an old saying that we had this in grad school, "In God we trust, all others must bring data." And that just really stuck with me. (Interviewee 12)

and

She also stated more than once the importance of collecting data and measuring for improvement. She emphasized that while it is important to create an atmosphere for continuous improvement, it is equally important to know how you are doing and to collect data to prove where you are and how far you need to go to reach your goal.

Measuring is key to performance excellence according to *name*. (FNIS 18)

Interviewee 19 stated, "I think that an organization or a community needs to consider how they are doing and how they define, 'How are we measuring ourselves.' I haven't seen a lot of that, which I've been exposed to in academia." Interviewee 17 also offered, "And I think you can't...I feel strongly about the data because it helps you make good choices, and if you aren't measuring anything then how can you know what you have." The importance of measurements as an overarching attribute will be discussed in chapter five.

Measurements were the third-highest scoring attribute as revealed by the participants in this study. There were 97 passages referring (coded) to this attribute, which indicates its



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importance in the perceptions of those interviewed. This attribute was one of the four that all participants talked about during their interview.

### **Perceptions concerning relationship building and customer service.**

The next attribute that seemed most important in the minds of those interviewed was relationship building. This attribute seemed to be a continual thread throughout the various interviews. Relationships and being connected was frequently discussed in providing positive customer service and bringing about performance excellence. Developing relationships with customers can often provide that sense of belonging and attachment where the customer becomes more of a partner in the business of education. This strengthens ties between the university and the graduate/student and creates a win-win atmosphere or culture for continued improvement.

The following subjects expressed their perceptions concerning this essential topic in these ways:

He would say 'hey, how is it going, do you need any help, just checking in' and they did that for people that didn't get jobs as well. They were like, 'hey, how is the job search going,' and also with networking. I thought they were very important...They were all in the field already so they were very good in helping us connect with who we needed to connect with. (Interviewee 02)

and

The reason I went to the xxx is because they really wanted me to attend there. They wanted me to be a part of their program. They pursued me and to some extent...There's an advisor there. There's that personal relationship. There's that personal touch. There was that person writing a letter or getting on the phone and saying 'I really enjoyed your visit. We're very interested in having you here. Let's talk some more because we think

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you'd be someone we'd like to have in our graduate school.' I didn't get that from x or xx or xxxx... (Interviewee 03)

and

I really appreciated that my advising professor took an interest in me and it was more than just the student professor relationship. It was not like we were friends, but she treated me like I was a person who had feelings and issues and family ties and all those different things. She understood and we just figured out ways together that we could, you know, work around that. (Interviewee 06)

and, "To me when the curriculum creates a connection to students and faculty members or the university in some way, that enhances the customer service and enhances the customer experience" Interviewee 08.

and

The quality of the university where everybody, where everybody knows you, you can build really strong bonds. I've been out from my undergrad since *year* and was there this weekend in *city* and (I) still have those bonds with those professors that are still from there, and strong relationships. Like I said, everybody there knows you... In xxx, it was a lot harder to build those kinds of relationships. I had a pretty good relationship with my advisor and people on my doctoral committee, but as far as relationships with my instructors, I could walk by now and they wouldn't know me. (Interviewee 18)

The fourth highest scoring attribute was relationship building and had 94 passages coded toward this characteristic seen as important by those interviewed. This attribute was also one of the four that all participants expressed as a key characteristic of customer service and performance excellence.

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### **How values are perceived in customer service and performance excellence.**

The next attribute of importance as seen from the perspective of those interviewed was the institution's values and how they are portrayed. This included the perceived reputation, principles exhibited, standards, and ideals from the college or university. The following subjects made these perceptive remarks:

It is a requirement. It is not something I would want to know. It is something I have to know. And that's pedagogy. Andragogy, adult learning, is something we want to know, something we want to use. If we don't see value in it, we are going to be mad and not have a good relationship with anybody. (Interviewee 08)

and

But, they just seemed to be, across the board, more caring. They expressed values, clearly they were an xxx school and they were open about expressing those, where it was just as clear to me at xx...I don't think they had values, or maybe the things they valued were not things that I value. So, in fact the things they value appear to me to be the opposite of traditional American values. (Interviewee 19)

The previous statements confirm the importance to the customer of having the organization establish values and the importance of those values being emphasized as a part of an institution's strategic performance excellence. These individuals explicitly describe their perceptions of how this topic is related to customer service and its magnitude in providing the type of satisfaction that is desired and expected.

The values of the organization and how they are portrayed was ranked fifth in the line-up of attributes, as perceived by the participants of this study. There were 82 passages containing some characteristic of this attribute.

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### **Responsiveness as integral to customer service.**

Many of the subjects added their perceptions to this research concerning the importance of organizations being responsive as integral to positive customer service. Responsiveness showed being open, approachable, attentive, receptive, and quick to respond. These interactions between the customer and the organization, which appear to be vital in meeting or exceeding their needs, work toward a performance excellence establishment. The following subjects offered their voice to this issue:

When I started evaluating graduate programs around the country and found the pro's that I liked the one that I eventually entered...They were very positively responsive, answered all my questions, worked with me very closely in making the decision to apply. Then being accepted, notifying that I was accepted, and then helping me get enrolled and complete the prerequisites. So I would say I was extremely satisfied going into the graduate program. (Interviewee 10)

The next subject discussed the positive responsiveness from an organization, but believed that processes were not in place to support an overall helpful customer experience.

There was miscommunication in applying for funding, it was a different program, different people and we had to transfer things...Everybody was responsive when I called, but it was frustrating because it took several calls to get through the transition... So, from a customer service standpoint, I feel like they would be better benefitted to have had a more concrete process in place for those. (Interview 17)

In another case, the subject connects the development of a relationship to the creation of appropriate customer service. Interviewee 19 stated, "I saw that the professors were very responsive and we developed a personal relationship. But the school, itself, was so distant that I

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never set foot on campus.” Research on this topic of customer service also revealed the connection with an organization’s willingness to meet various needs. Some of those interviewed spoke of this willingness in the following terms:

I think the whole customer service piece, the universities need to understand that, uh, do a better job in understanding that all of us have family obligations, we have work obligations and we have university obligations, and there has to be a balance between those three and sometimes more emphasis needs to be placed more on one than the other and the other parts need to be willing to give and there were probably more times in that process for me that I felt the university was not willing to give. It was always ‘we need from you.’ And that very final piece of the doctorate program that really ‘we need, we need, we need, you got to jump through so many hoops and make sure everything is in line.’ (Interviewee 04)

and

They were willing to meet specific needs that the doctoral students had more so than the other universities. I thought that at x and xx I was a number, but I felt like I was somebody with something to offer people when I was at xxx. (Interviewee 06)

Some other subjects offered their views on the topic of willingness or quickness to respond in customer service. One reported, “That particular professor was always willing to give her time and resources and helped out with whatever she could” (Interview 07). Another gave this praise:

Customer service from faculty was outstanding. If you had questions, complaints, praises, to whatever, they were there, they were willing to hear. I actually had one issue there where my faculty member, actually the department chair tracked me down to talk about

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something. They were very, very good, good; mind you this was in education.

(Interviewee 08)

The next subject commented on attentiveness and its impact on performance excellence in this way”

With their striving to be better and improving but ultimately it is establishing a culture of excellence and putting processes in place that will provide for customer service and will help the university achieve their goals hopefully by being attentive to the goals and aspirations of the students they serve. (Interviewee 03)

The next subject provided examples of the effect of an organization’s attentiveness to customer service.

Well, in my view, you try to make college a fail-safe, meaning that you would have to try to fail. We are going to be paying attention to what you are doing or not doing and we are going to be after you, so if you're failing a course in the middle of a semester, we're going to have your advisor call you in and track you down. (Interviewee 01)

Under the topic of responsiveness, the issue of timeliness seemed to come into play. Several respondents also discussed how timeliness influenced their perception of customer service and performance excellence as indicated in the following passage:

You know you went to the registrar’s office, you expected to be able to get your transcripts; I mean you expected service in that respect...If they go into student accounts, they want their bill to be accurate and, you know, and they want timely service in financial aid. I think they expect a competent instructor and they expect timely feedback on their papers and they expect to be challenged. (Interviewee 05)

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Also, in the realm of responsiveness for customer service, the characteristic of listening to the customer came up repeatedly. The next subject revealed some thoughts on how this aspect relates to customer service and performance excellence.

I think that both of those are huge, hugely important and I do think that there are some things that lead a person in the graduate program to choose one place over another.

Reputation being one, cost, location, all of those things are important. But if you continually hear, "I didn't learn anything from that program or those professors did not listen to me or my expectations were not met in some way," then I think students will gradually fade out of those programs. (Interviewee 09)

This subject offered an additional perception around listening to the customer, "We had school climate class, and how to care for that. We dealt with the helpful communication and listening. Those kinds of things. But it would have been helpful to think of it in terms of customer service" (Interviewee 15).

The attribute of responsiveness was ranked sixth out of the 11 attributes for importance in the minds of those interviewed. There were 75 passages coded with characteristics toward this attribute. This attribute was also one of the four that all participants viewed as central to customer service and performance excellence.

### **Accessibility as integral to customers and for customers.**

Accessibility for customers and to customers of higher education was seen as an important attribute by those interviewed. Accessibility included being easily reached or available, obtainable and providing timely service. Interviewee 03 stated, "There were instances where, depending on the class I was taking, there were situations where clear concise answers or timely responses weren't readily available." This attribute is generally positive as perceived by

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those interviewed, but it can also be a source of irritation even when an institution is trying to provide for the customer's good. This perception is seen as the next reference adds light to the situation.

Then you go to the doctoral program, it's just "you need to do this, here's this, you have to use the xxx's email address" that is the big thing, because that is how we got all of our information... They have to use the university address rather than our own. They can't guarantee that our own email address is going to be accessible. They can guarantee that the xxx address is going to be there, so that is what the xxx did and it worked out. I hated it, but it worked very, very well. (Interview 08)

While still under the associated topic of access, some of the subjects revealed a connection with the idea of creating an environment that might be construed as being of comfort, such as in the next passages:

The professors all read them... They pushed me into the best practice which I really didn't know was the best practice at the time and they made me become comfortable with it just because of the structure of the program. They also pushed me to become an avid reader. It is not that I didn't like to read, I just felt like I didn't have time to read. (Interviewee 04)

and:

I think it was just kind of an overall when you talked to people and you looked at what school am I going to go to. You know, you talk to people if they like their classes or they liked their instructors or, uh, you know the school is friendly, they felt comfortable on campus, I mean, yeah, and that's all the things I can think of, around. (Interviewee 05)

The seventh ranked attribute, with 72 coded passages, was accessibility. Participants believed that accessibility was critical to positive customer service and performance excellence.



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### **Perceived importance of a support system.**

In addition to creating or providing the attributes previously listed, an organization for higher education needs to establish a method of providing or ensuring there is a support system for their customers, at least according to the subjects interviewed. The following remarks lend credence to this important characteristic of customer service. The first participant said, “If you don't have a support system ready to help folks succeed when you're running into a brick wall, you'll have more drawbacks and then you'll have to worry about replacing those credit hours” (Interviewee 01). Associated with a support system is the concept of providing for or ensuring there is support for the needs of the customer as well as with the organization (as in a symbiotic relationship) in higher education. This issue, as well as its impact, can be seen in the statements from the following subjects:

There was a culture, I guess I would say within, with my, a culture within the departments and the entities that I dealt with that just seemed to be one of support and service that I appreciated, that I found welcoming and friendly. Otherwise I wouldn't have been there. (Interviewee 03)

and:

Now to me, taking the long view, how can we get our graduates to recall and look fondly upon their experience so they will give us money is critical, because when you look at the ways universities support themselves, credit hours is one of the ones, but also providing financial aid for students who don't have the means is the other. So they've got to have people wanting to have other hooks to go to the university and be able to support them. (Interviewee 01)

And:

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If we had not finished our program, then we would have several more requirements, and the things we had already done would not work, and it was quite an ordeal. So that program kind of soured me for xxx, and my undergraduate degree is from there also. I had been a pretty faithful supporter until then. So the customer service, I was pleased that the president of the university would take time to personally write each of us. That was good; however the department of education did not provide good customer service for us. They were unable to meet our needs or tell us how to fix things, to get things done.

(Interviewee 09)

The eighth ranked attribute was having a support system. There were 58 instances of passages coded to this important attribute. Sixteen of the 20 indicated they viewed having a support system as essential to positive customer service and performance excellence.

### **Empathy as integral to customer service.**

An aspect of empathy appears to be a positive outlook or attitude generated by the customer toward the institution. The next subjects commented on this aspect in the following ways:

You are spending money, you are trying to work, you're tired, you are just about spent, you want to be done, and so in some cases those encounters, those relationships, those conversations, can make you, depending on how they are taken, can make you feel less positive about the customer service or the, especially if there is someone who is contemplating dropping out, stuff like that. (Interviewee 03)

A short interjection by another subject described, in part, his experience and perceptions on this issue, "At xxx. The only experience I had there was positive. I only took five classes towards the Ed.D. Everything was positive" (Interviewee 10). Conversely, another participant referenced this

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attribute by stating, “I really did not want to go to graduate school again because I did not want to get myself back into that setting...The difference at xxx, is that they really felt you were there to be their slave” (Interviewee 16). The next participant expressed that, “I feel like I really got that. So I was happy with that part of it. Another thing I was happy with was they really encouraged me in my first year” (Interviewee 02). The next participant offered the following insight as to the importance of empathy:

But as a reactor, I need some positive...you can tell me the negative, but I need a little feeding and watering of positive, and I think the most successful supervisors are very, very good at that. They are able to keenly gauge what their employees need. (Interviewee 18)

One of the subjects spoke eloquently about the issue of caring as it related to customer service and performance excellence. Although others touched on this topic, this interviewee seemed to synthesize it well in this way:

It was much more professional and it caused me to question some of my assumptions I have about academia. I don't know if that is because it is a private xxx university, or because it was just a more caring university. I don't know if there are state supported universities with that same attitude or not, I just haven't found one. (Interviewee 18)

A closely associated topic under the heading of empathy is courteousness and the following subject made these comments concerning this issue: “Customer service is how we interact and treat people and performance excellence is the end product...Did we solve whatever problem they had at that time? Were we courteous with them versus snapping at them” (Interviewee 04)?

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Empathy was the ninth ranked attribute in the list of fundamental characteristics as perceived by the participants. Fifteen of the 20 identified this attribute through 43 passages as essential to positive customer service and performance excellence.

### **Consistency as a characteristic of customer service.**

Consistency was identified by several subjects as an important characteristic for customer satisfaction and a source of dissatisfaction if not obtained. The attribute of being consistent includes being dependable, reliable, and well organized. One subject, referring to consistency, made the following statement:

Well, I think the institutions; they are creating their image with all of their professors.

Now if they have a number of professors that are consistent on delivering good customer service, then, again, the entire college will reap those benefits. If there is only a few, the college itself may not be labeled as proactive on that particular topic. (Interviewee 14)

In regards customer service, the dimension of what is perceived as appropriate popped up and added additional insight to how graduates perceive consistency.

They seemed to be a very focused program, getting results, and getting excellence students that were going to make a contribution in this world. Is that how you would define performance excellence? I think in those programs that was appropriate.

(Interviewee 19)

In addition to accuracy, another aspect of customer service is having the necessary staff to meet the needs and that they are appropriately trained. The following excerpts touch on this feature:

I would say that the university should provide customer service training to their staff. So when you hire someone and you bring them on the job and they are supposed to help with registration or help with financial activities, they should be provided customer service

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training so they can learn how to provide correct customer service...So when I look at higher education and I look at the hiring process, the interview, the qualifications, you know good customer service should be one of the job qualifications, it should be part of the interview process and then should be trained and follow up to evaluate that they are providing good customer service. If they are not, then they should be replaced.

(Interviewee 10)

The next subject had this to say about the importance of staff being trained for customer service:

I think that performance excellence is what keeps that organization in business. Well, we can work at the financials and see what the performance is. If you don't satisfy the customer, if you don't satisfy the staff, if you don't have the quality of work, you're not going to survive in the business world. I think you can see that in business that focus on the financials but don't focus on anything else. (Interviewee 16)

In addition, field notes offered this insight concerning training the staff to meet the internal and external customer's needs:

Since she works for a university, she transferred the questions I had about her perceptions of customer service and performance excellence to her work experience. Her current focus is to train her subordinates in creating a great customer service to any customer (student or faculty) that comes to her satellite facilities. She says she wishes she could instill in higher education the concepts of customer service that seem to come much more naturally in business. (FNIS 13)

Consistency in customer service has been shown to have the characteristics of being dependable, efficient, and reliable.

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The attribute of consistency was ranked tenth in the list of required characteristics for sound customer service and performance excellence. There were 28 passages coded toward this attribute.

### **Perceptions of trust, credibility, follow-through, and loyalty.**

As the discussion with the subjects continued, the interrelatedness of several of the concepts and threads that this research uncovered came to light. While the next sequence is somewhat lengthy, it illustrates how one participant tied together the importance of trust, credibility, follow-through, and loyalty or allegiance as it relates to customer service in a very poignant and fairly concise manner.

E: I think in any situation like that, follow-up, if you say I'll find out for you and then you don't, you will lose your credibility. So, follow-up is very, very important. So, probably accessibility, follow-through/follow-up are keys to customer service.

R: OK, you've mentioned about previous relationships. How does that relate to customer service?

E: Trust. When you have a relationship, that level of trust increases. If you don't have any basis in your relationship, it is pretty hard to trust somebody.

R: Trust is a major component of...?

E: Yes, of any relationship...

R: And customer service...?

E: Yeah, absolutely. Just being genuine, again, follow-up, you know, I just think that for customer service, your customers; whether they be your students, the alumni, or whoever they are, have to know that if they ask for your help, you are going to address their needs in a timely way and follow-through. They have to trust that you are going to do that. And

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if you don't do it even once, that level of trust falls off significantly...Everybody has their own dipstick on how to measure people. To me, I measure people on their integrity, their relationships, how they treat other people, how they respond to people, and how they follow through. Do what you say you are going to do. Those are all quality measures to me of successful people...And I believe that allegiance is like a customer service, like developing that relationship of trust and will take care of you and help meet your needs.

(Interviewee 18)

This attribute of being trustworthy, credible, loyal, and having follow-through was unique in the line-up of the 11 expressed by the participants. This characteristic was ranked 11 and had 27 passages coded toward it. Half of the participants recognized this attribute's importance, which added it to the listings of those seen as vital to providing positive customer service and performance excellence.

### **Summary of the Research**

Establishing positive customer service means creating customer satisfaction, as is illustrated in many of the scripts from the variety of subjects interviewed. There appears to be a hierarchy for expressing attributes of customer satisfaction that moves an organization from dissatisfiers (which when absent create an instant negative perception for the product or service), to satisfiers, (expectations each customer has of the particular organization's service or product), up to delighting the customer, (generally, going beyond expectations.) The delights will cause the customer to not only return, but to tell others of her/his great find. Evans (2008) described satisfiers, dissatisfiers, and delighters in the following manner:

- Dissatisfiers—those needs that are expected in a product or service, such as a radio, heater, and required safety features in an automobile. Such items generally are not

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stated by customers but are assumed as given. If they are not present, the customer is dissatisfied.

- Satisfiers—needs that customers say they want, such as air conditioning or compact disc player in a car. Fulfilling these needs creates satisfaction.
- Delighters/exciters—new or innovative feature that customers do not expect. When first introduced, antilock brakes and air bags were examples of exciters. The presence of such unexpected features, if valued, leads to high perceptions of quality. (p. 41)

Evans (2008) made certain observations concerning the value of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the service or product. He stated:

- The average company never hears from more than 90 percent of its unhappy customers. For every complaint it receives, the company has at least 25 customers with problems, about one fourth of which are serious.
- Of the customers who make a complaint, more than half will do business again with that organization if their complaint is resolved. If the customer feels that the complaint was resolved quickly, this figure jumps to about 95 percent.
- The average customer who has had a problem will tell nine or ten others about it. Customers who have had complaints resolved satisfactorily will only tell about five others.
- It costs six times more to get a new customer than to keep a current customer. (pp. 16-17)

When it comes to delighting the customer, Evans (2008) equated it to building loyalty and described the advantages of creating loyalty in one's customers.



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Satisfaction and loyalty are very different concepts. Satisfaction is an attitude; loyalty is a behavior. Customers who are merely satisfied may often purchase from competitors because of convenience, promotions, or other factors. Loyal customers place a priority on doing business with a particular organization, and will often go out of their way to pay a premium to stay with the company. Loyal customers spend more, are willing to pay higher prices, refer new clients, and are less costly to do business with. (p. 172)

The customer service and performance excellence attributes that have been discovered through this research in order of importance, as perceived by the interviewees, are: competency, providing guidance, measurements, relationship building, values of the organization, responsiveness, accessibility, support systems, empathy, consistency, and TCLFT (trustworthiness, credibility, loyalty, and follow-through). These 11 attributes capture the essence of what the participants in this qualitative study offered as vital to serving the customer in higher education.

As a wrap-up to this study, the last interviewee had the following to say at the end of conversation about the difference between customer service and performance excellence:

Customer service is simply trying to meet the needs of the customer and drive that relationship. I think that is a good crystallization of it. Performance excellence is a way of being for an institution that drives both internal and external factors to what would be called a point of excellence, and that is adhering to a certain standard of prescribed methods accepted as an excellent standard. (Interviewee 20)

Other participants seemed to be like minded, as they offered their viewpoints of the correlation between performance excellence and customer service strategies. The specific correlation was

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not revealed in these interviews, although those who spoke of these issues leaned toward positive customer service as a part of the organization's overall performance excellence strategy.

## CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The final chapter of this study on graduate perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning includes a restatement of the research problem, a review of the research methodology, and a summary of the results. Also included is a discussion of the implications of the results, as well as recommendations for future study.

### **Restatement of the Research Problem**

The search for performance excellence and customer service in higher education is ongoing. Specific literature on the subject is not readily available. Bruffee (1999) believes that major changes are needed in higher education, particularly in the “relations we assume between college and university professors and their students, between the learned and the learning” (para. 1). Discussing the educational needs of graduates, Bruffee (1999) said:

The problem is not that graduate professors do not know what they need to know. The problem is that most of them have learned what they know entirely under the traditional social conditions of academic alienation and aggression. Indeed, the problem is that members of current graduate faculties were selected into the profession in part because they evidenced those traits. As a result, their fine education and superb reputations as scholars and critics may in some cases actually subvert their ability to understand knowledge as a social construct, learning as an adult social process, and teaching as a role of leadership among adults. (para. 9)

While there is much literature about the needs of the student, little exists from a performance excellence standpoint. Even less literature is available on what students need at the graduate program level. Regarding choices of which college to attend, Chapman (1979) pointed out:

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In thinking about the demand side of the enrollment picture, there are two major researchable areas. The first set of issues involves going about the process of deciding to which colleges they will apply. Once a student chooses which colleges will be in his choice set, the second key researchable question arises: how do students choose among colleges? (p. 38)

Throughout the literature, when discussing the issue of measuring the effectiveness of colleges and universities, the discussion often turns to evaluating the providers. However, Gates, et al. (2002), informed us that “the assessment of any education system involves more than assessing individual providers of that education” (p. 25) Universities and colleges all around the world struggle to find the set of measurements that will enable them to reach their proposed vision and complete their mission. Institutions of higher learning strive to discover those student-centered measurements that constitute “dashboard” measurements for greater customer satisfaction and fiscal stability. These commonalities are sought with the expectation of revealing sufficient descriptive evidence useful for the institutions to emulate, which would propel them toward best-in-class status (performance excellence).

This research sought from a graduate’s perspective -- one who has completed master’s level degree, is a doctorate student, or completed a doctorate -- what requirements are essential to providing positive customer service and performance excellence. Identifying these requirements would assist educational institutions in their quest to become best-in-class. Is there a common set of descriptors or measurements that are focused on the primary customers’ (graduates’) needs, which would drive the college or university in the direction of outstanding

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customer service and financial gain? What do the college/university's graduates think about this? Their perspective on customer service has been the focus of this research.

### **A Review of the Research Methodology**

Only the customer can truly determine if any process is of value (Three Experts on Quality Management, 1992, p. 9). The customer of this qualitative study will determine its credibility. This was the primary rationale for completing feedback checks with the participants and ensuring field notes were completed as soon as possible afterwards. The primary research question raised in the pursuit of further understanding graduates' perception of customer service was, "What are graduate perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning?" To answer this question, additional sub-questions needed to be answered. These sub-questions included:

1. What did graduates think about customer service and performance excellence prior to the beginning of their advanced degree?
2. What do graduates think about customer service and performance excellence after the completion of their degree?

The method employed was a basic, interpretive qualitative study in which the researcher constructed reality in the interaction with the social world. "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Data was collected through interviews, observations, and field notes. The basic goal for qualitative researchers is "in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

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To reiterate, this research design was a basic interpretive qualitative study using constant comparisons and triangulation through field notes. The study's limitations were discussed in chapter one.

### **A Model of Customer Satisfaction**

With that being said, a model was discovered during the course of the interviews from one of the latter participants. This model was offered for use with the analysis of the data collected. During the process of data analysis, it became increasingly clear that the themes being revealed partially fit the profile of the model. The Vandehaar Model of Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy complemented the data discovered. The logical next step was to obtain the model as a framework and it was offered for just such usage. The model depicted a hierarchy of customer satisfaction and listed several attributes necessary for meeting the customer's needs and further delighting him/her. The model suggested minimum levels that would only produce dissatisfaction, levels that would produce satisfaction, and certain levels of customer service needed in order to produce delight in the customer. Vandehaar's Model of Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy offered form to many of the attributes the interviewees gave as evidence of their perceptions of customer service in institutions of higher learning. Attributes found in this study and listed in Vandehaar's model included competency, responsiveness, accessibility, empathy, and consistency (reliability). The model is shown in Appendix N.

In order to demonstrate how the Vandehaar model complimented the work of this research, the author constructed a three dimensional model based on Vandehaar's original. This model is shown in Appendix R.

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### **Summary of the Results**

The results of the interviews and of this research are at least two-fold. First, the Vandelaar model of Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy supports this study, and second, the results emphasize the importance of certain additional attributes in ensuring positive customer service and performance excellence. These attributes include: giving the necessary guidance to the customer; measuring for customer service and performance excellence; establishing appropriate relationships with the customers; weighting the organization's and customers' values, thereby creating satisfaction; and finally, fostering trust, credibility, follow-through, connectedness, and loyalty/allegiance. Measurements were identified by the participants as one of the top four themes that all interviewees recognized as essential in providing positive customer service and performance excellence. This attribute would seem to encompass all other mentioned attributes, as it would directly affect the others and could show improvement in each of the others.

The attributes discovered during the interviews include each of the primary attributes addressed in the Vandelaar model as well as many of the associated characteristics of those attributes previously mentioned in chapter four. In addition, threaded throughout the interviews were the additional attributes previously mentioned in this summary. Additional is not meant to imply these characteristics are of lesser value or importance, simply that these qualities were not originally listed as part of Vandelaar's customer satisfaction model.

The review of the wealth of data submitted by the interviewees indicated that there was a correlation between customer service and performance excellence, at least in the minds of the 20 subjects interviewed. As shown in chapter four, several defined positive customer service as integral to improving performance excellence, as well as indicating the difficulty of providing one component in an institution without the other. Customer service was seen as one important

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aspect of the overall strategy of performance excellence, although those interviewed acknowledged that there were several cases in which an individual or a department may have provided exceptional customer service and yet the entire organization did not share that focus.

### **Discussion of the Implications of the Results**

The value of this research is in demonstrating what graduates' perceptions of customer service and performance excellence are. The perceptions support the attributes listed in the Vandehaar model for Customer Service Hierarchy as well as six additional threads which included (1) the importance of values shown in an organization in creating customer satisfaction, (2) the necessary guidance given to the customer, (3) developing a support system, (4) establishing appropriate relationships with the customers, (5) ensuring trust, credibility, follow-through, and loyalty or allegiance, and (6) measurements for customer service and performance excellence.

The results show the importance of organizations and institutions of higher learning to constantly be focusing on the attributes that provide customer service and performance excellence, not only for the customers and other stakeholders, but also for themselves, as it has a direct impact on the bottom line. The implications are that this research adds credence to the Vandehaar model for Customer Service Hierarchy and that it directs the attention of those seeking to develop or improve positive customer service and performance excellence toward specific attributes that are important and/or critical to maintaining and improving those relationships and having a focus on continuous improvement.

Graduates' perceptions concerning customer service and performance excellence prior to starting their advanced degrees were often non-existent or barely formed, as shown in chapter four in the section on "Differences perceived prior and post graduation." No interviewee



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described an understanding or an awareness of performance excellence in relationship to their alma mater prior to their degree. Nor did they report that they were aware of the key measurements their college or university utilized in the pursuit of positive customer service or performance excellence. When they did discuss performance excellence, it was often directed internally on how the participant could have performed better versus how their institution was performing. Perhaps those concepts are still being formed for many individuals. Nevertheless, the perceptions of the interviewees concerning customer service played a larger role, and frequently mentioned were items such as speed and accuracy of enrollment, competent professors, and necessary books being available at the book store. As seen in the many comments made by the interviewees, their awareness and concern for customer service and satisfaction seemed to be more astute after graduation. This could well be from the various life experiences individuals have as they progress through the years. The average age of the interviewee indicates that she or he was roughly three decades older than the traditional college students.

The graduates' interviews showed an increasing knowledge, understanding, and perceptiveness concerning the issues around customer service and performance excellence after completion of their advanced degree. Their opinions were more sharply formed and their input supported the Vandelaar model and its characteristics, as well as the stated six additional themes or attributes of perceived effective customer service.

What this research does not find is also revealing. One of the characteristics the researcher expected to find was that of the importance of teams and teamwork. This seemed to be a vital characteristic of customer service and performance excellence, yet was not readily discussed during the interviews. As shown in the appendix, the number of times it was discussed

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and the number of interviewees discussing this topic was significantly less than the other attributes. On a closer examination, just two interviewees discussed this topic over half of the total times listed. Although those two expressed their views of the importance of teams and teamwork, the rest of those interviewed did not seem to acknowledge the same. Perhaps this was because of the mean age of the participants or perhaps the topic was not directly posed to them. On the other hand, each attribute had equal opportunity to be discussed. The questions listed in Appendix C showed that minimal structure was given, and great latitude was provided, to talk about whatever issues the participants desired.

Other expectations of what would be revealed during the interviews were the attributes of culture, engagement, empowerment, and motivation. Any significant discussion of these attributes was not apparent in the research as shown in Appendix R. A search of these elements yielded insufficient data to determine their importance to the subjects who were interviewed. Fewer than half of the participants discussed these attributes. The possible rationale will be explored in the next section.

Another insight or discovery this research revealed was the possible answer to the perennial question of “Why is it so difficult to produce positive and consistent customer service that continues to create satisfaction and/or delight the customer/client?” As there are multiple facets to the creation and sustaining of positive customer service and performance excellence, the difficulty lies within the commitment to continually produce these qualities. Commitment is often the domain of the management and leadership. Without a clear and constant focus on this commitment, the probability of creating and sustaining positive customer service diminishes. Priority is often not given to customer service as a management focus; therefore limited

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resources are placed elsewhere. On a positive note, one interviewee who works in higher education made this comment about training her personnel and dealing with the customer:

This is really different for him, but he is the one that really gets it the best. Who knew? But honestly, we are starting our third year together, and they are getting much better. They understand the priority is to do what the student needs. You got a faculty member. Help that faculty member with whatever they want. They are guests in our facility. We are there to make their experience good. (Interviewee 13)

What this subject was pointing out was the need to ensure that the internal customer's needs were met in order to meet or exceed the external customer's needs. This theme was consistent throughout the interviews, in addition to being a frequent topic in the literature on performance excellence.

The perceptions of the interviewees added strength to the supposition that customer service strategies assist institutions of higher learning in becoming more effective and/or efficient. For the most part, the customer service provided to the graduate was able to meet his/her needs, although, in some of the cases, the graduate changed institutions in order to acquire appropriate customer service. This may be what led to the very high scoring of customer satisfaction from the interviewee for their graduating (as compared to attending but not graduating) institution. Sixteen of the 10 reported that they were "Highly Satisfied." What was also apparent in these interviews was the persistence of many of the graduates in obtaining necessary support to complete their educational goals. At times, they succeeded despite the barriers they encountered.

Graduates, as part of this research, did not indicate that they were concerned about whether or not the customer service provided was related to factors such as strategies, goals, and

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objectives of their alma mater. Their concern was instead expressed as part of their perception of the value of customer service to them, their friends, or their acquaintances. This is consistent with literature that also indicates most customers are looking for “what’s in it for me?” and are not usually concerned with other performance measures of the institution if they are not directly affected. Since several of the interviewees attended multiple colleges or universities, they were able to differentiate customer service levels provided to them from various institutions of higher learning. This was also shown in the chapter reviewing the data.

The grade point average for the participants, who were selected for this study, as has been mentioned, had a mean of 3.88. This fairly high GPA may have also unduly influenced the outcome of this study, as all those interviewed were high-performing individuals and appeared to be self-starters. The implications of this could be far-reaching since the results may have been quite different had the participants not been as successful in their studies. That trait – being high-performing - may have impacted the course they took in life and the jobs they subsequently acquired. Their high GPA could have also influenced how they look at life and their general dispositions, which tended to be proactive and focused. On the other hand, perhaps their general dispositions was what led them toward a high GPA. Nevertheless, another study with subjects having lower GPAs may yield a divergent outlook than what this research showed.

One anticipated aspect of this research was that some barriers to perceived customer service and performance excellence would emerge. However, since the question of barriers was not raised in the interviews, very little discussion around that issue actually materialized. One individual did discuss barriers but it appeared to be more about the standards of being accepted to the college or university, rather than from a customer service standpoint. A participant stated:

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I am going to pass your test, let me in. No! You cannot get in. So an initial barrier right up front that could have turned some people off and I know it has turned some people off because you got to take this test to be in. Interviewee 04

### **Self versus institutional viewpoint.**

An aspect that has only lightly been touched on is that some individuals were focused internally rather than toward the chosen university. One example of this is given by Interviewee 15 when she said, “I treat them the way I want to be treated...being informative and helpful. That’s kind of my perception of customer service and things I’ve learned in the past four to five years since I got my degree.” In another example, Interviewee 18 stated, “I think my one goal is to always be there for my students. I provide my email address, my phone, I tell them to call me with whatever they need.” The possibilities for answering in this manner can be seen in understanding human nature. It is often easier to describe something in terms of how it applies to oneself and therefore, internalizing questions about issues outside of an individual are not uncommon. Another rationale may be that the ease of justifying one’s own perceptions could subconsciously direct an individual to internalize their answers about institutions of higher learning.

Whatever the case may be, the data given is still the perception of the individual giving it and is neutrally based. That is, since the information being given belongs to the individual giving it, the information cannot be right or wrong.

### **Support services in institutions versus faculty.**

As the interviews were culled over and reviewed, it became obvious that customer service and performance excellence were sometimes attributed to the support services of an institution and at other times to the faculty. An institution has many departments; therefore each

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of them has an opportunity to create a satisfied or dissatisfied customer. The intensity of that opportunity can greatly affect an individual's perception positively or negatively, regardless of other encounters at the same college or university. One interviewee explains it as follows:

I think that there are two different aspects of that and I still think that that's a valid way to approach it. That I think that there's in the classroom where the students are, they're a product. They are a partner in the process. Whereas when they go to the student account office, they are a customer just like if they called up their cell phone provider and want information on their bill and want clarification on why the bill... I think that's very much a traditional customer-supplier relationship. Whereas, in the classroom it is much more complex. (Interviewee 05)

One interviewee differentiated the various aspects of multiple departments when he stated his satisfaction with one and dissatisfaction with another. Interviewee 10 stated, "I mentioned early that I have been fully satisfied with faculty members, especially in the classroom. My dissatisfaction has been mainly with the administration. Not administrators, but staff, workers, people that are working financial aid working registration." One other participant gave this view:

Customer service was fantastic. I would say for it being a large university, I never felt like I was a number. Unless it came to dealing with certain financial aid things and getting transcripts and things like that, but they did very quickly take care of me and they found another way to get my student I.D. if I didn't know my number. I can say that I have been pleased. (Interviewee 08)

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As shown, customer service in one department can adversely or positively affect another department. The importance of that interaction or the severity of it seemed to create the perceptions of the institution as a whole for the participants who were interviewed.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

Very little literature exists on the perceptions of graduates' perceptions of customer service in higher education. This is particularly true of non-traditional working adults. Not only is this combination difficult to find, but what seems to exacerbate the issue is that the concept of customer service and its perceived attributes are very elusive. There does not seem to be a consensus in literature as to what is required to promote positive customer service and performance excellence. Nevertheless, there are some examples and methods which could be offered for study and this research is intended to be at the forefront of future studies.

As already mentioned, it is intriguing that very little quality data from the interviews revealed any strong connection between the attributes of teams, teamwork, culture, engagement, empowerment, and motivation with customer service or performance excellence from the interviewees' perspective. This area seems to be ripe for further research as literature supports the concept. Yet these elements did not seem to be a high enough priority in the interviewees' minds to come to the surface while discussing their perceptions of customer service and performance excellence. Nevertheless, much has been written about the importance of these characteristics whenever performance excellence is reviewed. Therefore, it would appear that the study of these attributes in regard to customer service would benefit from further study. Another possible reason for not receiving expected data could be found in the questions asked or in how they were asked. Since the interview was semi-structured, there was great latitude in interpreting

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the questions and how to respond to them. Each individual dug into her or his past to best determine the answers.

As individuals reached into their past to respond to the interview questions, they relied on their memory to assist in the answers. The longer it had been since graduation, the longer the time frame from which the individual was asked to recall. This time frame could have an effect on the accuracy of what was recalled. This limitation would lead to a recommendation of repeating this study using only subjects are more recent graduates.

Additionally, in reviewing the limitations of this study, research of graduates' perceptions of customer service and performance excellence consisting of a larger geographical area may yield a stronger focus or a possible different spotlight. Perhaps the biases of the researcher affected the outcome; it most certainly affected the follow-on questions that were asked during the semi-structured interviewing process. Also, the type of sampling technique that was used limited the diversity of the subjects represented in this study, leaving considerable room for improvement. The ethnicity demographic was certainly not diverse. On the other hand, there was considerable diversity in age, gender, economic status, and length of time since completion of the advanced degree.

A final recommendation for further study would be the validation of a model for customer satisfaction that encompasses both the attributes of the Vandehaar model and those additional attributes threaded throughout the discussions that are seen to be vital or pivotal to positive customer service. These additional attributes include: trust, credibility, follow-through, connectedness, loyalty (allegiance), measurements for customer service and performance excellence, weight of the values of the organization and the customer in creating satisfaction, the necessary guidance given to the customer, and establishing appropriate relationships with the



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customers. An example of this model is shown in Appendix R. Five additional attributes are shown on the side of the pyramid and the attribute of measurements encompasses all attributes. The front of the pyramid is seen as a skill set and the side of the pyramid is shown as a set of attitudes. This model was built from the data acquired in this study and is open to further research and validation.

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## GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

### **Appendix A Kansas State University Informed Consent Form**

Project Title: Graduate Perceptions of Performance Excellence in Institutions of Higher Learning

Principle Investigator: W. Franklin Spikes, III., Ed.D.

Co-Investigator: Danny D. Walters, M.S. Counseling

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728 Chatta  
Haysville, KS 67060  
316-993-7693  
[dannydwalters@cox.net](mailto:dannydwalters@cox.net)

Sponsor of Project: College of Education

Purpose of Project: This research will expand the body of knowledge in areas of graduate perceptions of performance excellence from their chosen college or university. It is hoped that the knowledge created from this research will contribute to the overall understanding of how to increase student (customer) satisfaction and better meet the needs of doctoral level graduates.

Procedures of methods to be used: The method to be employed is a basic, interpretive qualitative study in which the researcher constructs reality in the interaction with the social world. Interviews will be completed with graduates who have an educational or organizational emphasis dealing with customer service or performance excellence. The population was selected because of the researcher's background in quality improvement and adult education. Criterion, snowball, maximum variation, and convenience purposeful sampling techniques will be used to identify interviewees who meet the criterion of the study. Potential participants will be contacted by the researcher and asked to take part in the study. Data will be collected via interview guide/semi-structured interviews until thematic saturation or twenty participants have been interviewed. The interviews will be recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

Debriefing Issues: The recordings will be transcribed and each participant will be offered a review the transcript of his or her interview to ensure that the transcription is accurate and that the researcher interpreted the intended perspective of the participant correctly. Constant comparison will be used to analyze the transcripts of the interview. A completed copy of this study will be offered to the participants and sent to their e-mail address if desired.

Length of Study: Approximately one hour for the interview and approximately two hours to review the transcription of the interview. Possible follow-up questions either in person, via telephone, or e-mail may occur during the final data analysis stage.

Risks Anticipated: None

## GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

**Anticipated Benefits:** It is anticipated that the body of knowledge dealing with graduate perceptions of performance excellence in their college or university will be increased. It is also likely that this study will lead to enhanced methods for improving customer satisfaction in the form of graduates' satisfaction of the leadership and management of their chosen institution of higher learning.

**Extent of Confidentiality:** Confidentiality related to all aspects of the data collected from each participant will be strictly maintained. The researcher will conduct the interview in a private location. The respondent will be given a pseudonym to be used in labeling the data collection materials as well as in the transcript and final version of the dissertation. On the transcriptionist, a third party reviewer, and the researcher will hear the tapes of the interview and see the transcriptions. All data collection materials will be stored in a secured location. There is the potential that this research will be submitted for publication following the successful defense of the dissertation. In this case, the identity of the participant will continue to remain confidential.

**Terms of Participation:** I understand this project is research and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating at any time without explanation or penalty. Declining participation may include any form of communication including not showing up for the interview.

I verify that my signature below signifies that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

### **Appendix B Demographics of Interviewees**

Thank you for voluntarily taking the time to participate in this interview. You were specifically selected to participate in this study. Taking part in this interview is your opportunity to voice your opinion about your experiences as a graduate student in your chosen college or university. The data you provide will be used to understand graduate perceptions of performance excellence in institutions of higher learning. The demographic questions will be used in conjunction with an interview and the questions should take less than five minutes to complete. If you have any questions about this interview please feel free to contact Kansas State University College of Adult Education: 785-532-5535.

GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

1. Level of Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Masters <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
2. Final Degree in:	_____
3. Grade Point Average (on 4.0 scale)?	<input type="checkbox"/> <=4.0 <input type="checkbox"/> 3.8-3.9 <input type="checkbox"/> 3.5-3.7 <input type="checkbox"/> 3.0-3.4 <input type="checkbox"/> > 3.0
4. How many years has it been since you received your last degree?	<input type="checkbox"/> < 3 years <input type="checkbox"/> 3 – 5 years <input type="checkbox"/> 5 – 10 years <input type="checkbox"/> 10 – 20 years <input type="checkbox"/> > 20 years
5. How satisfied were you with your degree granting institution?	<input type="checkbox"/> Highly Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Dissatisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Highly Dissatisfied
6. Gender?	<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male
7. Age?	<input type="checkbox"/> 70 + <input type="checkbox"/> 60 - 69 <input type="checkbox"/> 50 - 59 <input type="checkbox"/> 40- 49 <input type="checkbox"/> 30- 39 <input type="checkbox"/> 21 -29 <input type="checkbox"/> Under 21
8. Race?	<input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian <input type="checkbox"/> African American <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

**Appendix C Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

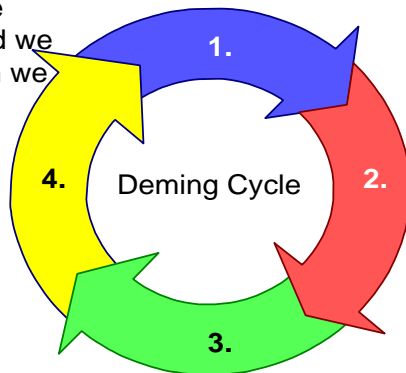
Please answer the demographics questionnaire first.

1. What did graduates think about customer service and performance excellence prior to the beginning of their advanced degree?
2. What do graduates think about customer service and performance excellence after the completion of their degree?

**Appendix D Deming Cycle**

4. Act—Study the results. What did we learn? What can we predict?

3. Check—Observe the effects of the change or test



1. Plan—What could be the most important accomplishments of this team? What changes might be desirable? What are the data available? Are new observations needed? If yes, plan a change or test. Decide how to use the observations.

2. Do—Carry out the change or test decided upon, preferably on a small scale.

5. Repeat step 1, with knowledge accumulated.

6. Repeat step 2, and onward.

*Note.* Reprinted from “Out of the Crisis,” by W. E. Deming. p. 88. Copyright 1986 by MIT Press.

**Appendix E Baldrige Performance Excellence Program Criteria, Item 3.1**

**3.1 Voice of the Customer: How do you obtain information from your students and stakeholders? (45 pts.)**

**Process**

Describe HOW your organization listens to students and STAKEHOLDERS and gains satisfaction and dissatisfaction information.

Within your response, include answers to the following questions:

**a. Student and STAKEHOLDER Listening**

- (1) **Listening to Current Students and STAKEHOLDERS** How do you listen to students and STAKEHOLDERS to obtain actionable information? How do your listening methods vary for different student groups, STAKEHOLDER groups, or market SEGMENTS? How do you use SOCIAL MEDIA and Web-based technologies to listen to students and STAKEHOLDERS, as appropriate? How do your listening methods vary across the stages of students' and STAKEHOLDERS' relationships with you? How do you follow up with students and STAKEHOLDERS on the quality of EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, student and STAKEHOLDER support, and transactions to receive immediate and actionable feedback?
- (2) **Listening to Potential Students and STAKEHOLDERS** How do you listen to former students and STAKEHOLDERS, potential students and STAKEHOLDERS, and students and STAKEHOLDERS of competitors to obtain actionable information and to obtain feedback on your EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, student and STAKEHOLDER support, and transactions, as appropriate?

**b. Determination of Student and STAKEHOLDER Satisfaction and ENGAGEMENT**

- (1) **Satisfaction and ENGAGEMENT** How do you determine student and STAKEHOLDER satisfaction and ENGAGEMENT? How do these determination methods differ among student and STAKEHOLDER groups and market SEGMENTS, as appropriate? How do your measurements capture actionable information for use in exceeding your students' and STAKEHOLDERS' expectations and securing your students' and STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT?
- (2) **Satisfaction Relative to Competitors** How do you obtain information on your students' and STAKEHOLDERS' satisfaction relative to their satisfaction with your competitors? How do you obtain information on your students' and STAKEHOLDERS' satisfaction relative to the satisfaction LEVELS of students and STAKEHOLDERS of other organizations providing similar EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS OR SERVICES or to appropriate BENCHMARKS?
- (3) **Dissatisfaction** How do you determine student and STAKEHOLDER dissatisfaction? How do your measurements capture actionable information for use in meeting your students' and STAKEHOLDERS' requirements and exceeding their expectations in the future?

*Note.* Reprinted from 2011-12 *Education Criteria for Performance Excellence*, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, MD., p. 13. Retrieved from [http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/upload/2011\\_2012\\_Education\\_Criteria.pdf](http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/upload/2011_2012_Education_Criteria.pdf)

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**Appendix F Stout Relationships with Key Stakeholders to Understand and Satisfy Needs**

Stakeholder	Relationship	Requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business and industry partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source of jobs for graduates</li> <li>• Source of technology transfer</li> <li>• Identify changing needs / trends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualified interns who can quickly contribute</li> <li>• High quality, steady pool of graduates</li> <li>• Highly qualified faculty consultants</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alumni and Friends of Stout</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source of student referrals and outreach</li> <li>• Source of donations, endowments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive image and reputation of UW-Stout</li> <li>• Communications and networking</li> <li>• Support for life-long learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeder schools and community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have mutually beneficial objectives</li> <li>• Sharing and access to both community and</li> <li>• UW-Stout facilities and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative two-way relationship</li> <li>• Accept, develop, and graduate students</li> <li>• Safety</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board of Regents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represent Wisconsin citizens and taxpayers</li> <li>• Strengthen mission and performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound fiscal management</li> <li>• Enrollments and accreditation maintained</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from 2001 Malcolm Baldrige National Award Application, Stout-University of Wisconsin p. iv. Retrieved from [http://www.quality.nist.gov/PDF\\_files/UWStout\\_Application\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.quality.nist.gov/PDF_files/UWStout_Application_Summary.pdf)

**Appendix G Organizational Clarity Questionnaire**

---

**How does an organization go about achieving clarity?**

---

- Why does the organization exist, and what difference does it make in the world?

---

- What behavioral values are irreplaceable and fundamental?

---

- What business are we in, and against whom do we compete?

---

- How does our approach differ from that of our competitors?

---

- What are our goals this month, this quarter, this year, next year, five years from now?

---

- Who has to do what for us to achieve our goals this month, this quarter, this year, next year, five years from now?

---

*Note.* Adapted from "The four obsessions of an extraordinary executive" by P. Lencioni. p. 155. Copyright 2000 by Jossey-Bass.

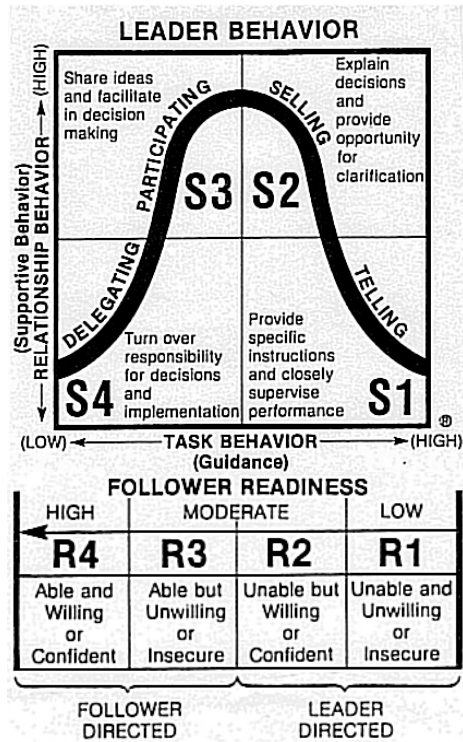
**Appendix H Collin’s Flywheel vs. Doom Loop Chart for Good to Great Organizations**

<b>How to tell if you’re on the flywheel or in the doom loop.</b>	
<b>Signs that you’re on the flywheel (Good to Great Companies)</b>	<b>Signs that you’re in the doom loop (Comparison Companies)</b>
Follow a pattern of buildup leading to breakthrough.	Skip buildup and jump right to breakthrough.
Reach breakthrough by an accumulation of steps, one after the other, turn by turn of the flywheel; feels like an organic evolutionary process.	Implement big programs, radical change efforts, dramatic revolutions; chronic restructuring—always looking for a miracle moment or new savior.
Confront the brutal facts to see clearly what steps must be taken to build momentum.	Embrace fads and engage in management hoopla, rather than confront the brutal facts.
Attain consistency with a clear Hedgehog Concept, resolutely staying within the three circles.	Demonstrate chronic inconsistency—lurching back and forth and straying far outside the three circles.
Follow the pattern of disciplined people (“first who”), disciplined thought, disciplined action.	Jump right to action, without disciplined thought and without getting the right people on the bus.
Harness appropriate technologies to your Hedgehog Concept, to accelerate momentum.	Run about like Chicken Little in reaction to technology change, fearful of being left behind.
Spend little energy trying to motivate or align people; the momentum of the flywheel is infectious.	Spend a lot of energy trying to align and motivate people, rallying them around new visions.
Let results to most of the talking.	Sell the future, to compensate for lack of results.
Maintain consistency over time; each generation builds on the work of previous generations; the flywheel continues to build momentum.	Demonstrate inconsistency over time; each new leader brings a radical new path; the flywheel grinds to a halt, and the doom loop begins anew.

*Note.* Adapted from “Good to great: Why some companies make the leap...and others don’t,” by J. Collins. pp. 183-184. Copyright 2001 by Harper Collins.



Appendix I Situational Leadership Chart



Note. Reprinted from "Management of organizational behavior," by P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard. p. 186. Copyright 1993 by Englewood Cliffs.

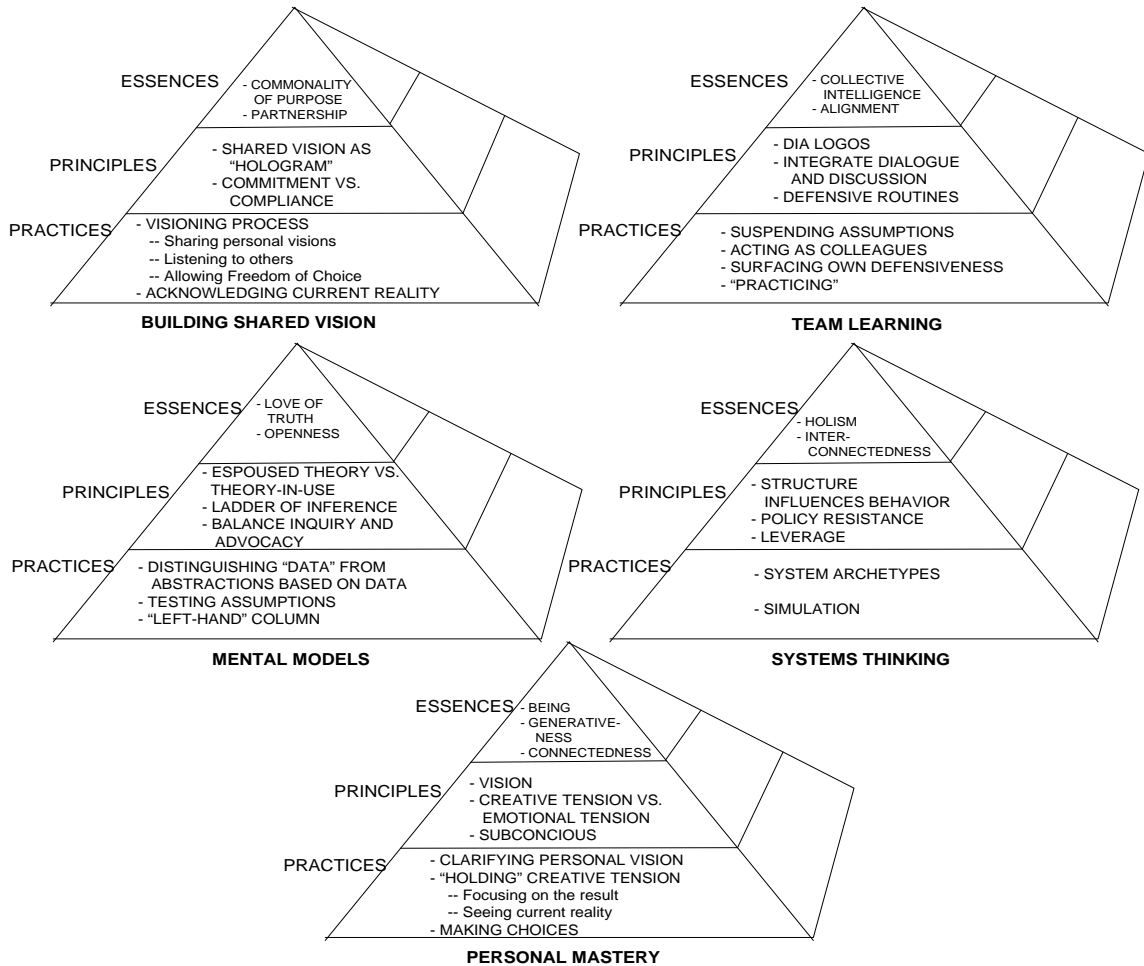
GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

**Appendix J PRDC at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management survey gap results**

<b>Gaps</b>	<b>Impact of gap</b>
Emotional self-awareness	Getting a reading of the emotional climate as it impact performance.
Achievement	Scanning the environment for crucial data and opportunities for enterprise.
Adaptability	Flexibility in the face of challenges or obstacles.
Self-control	Performing effectively under pressure rather than reacting out of panic, anger, or alarm.
Integrity	The reliability that breeds trust.
Optimism	Resilience in the face of setbacks.
Empathy	Understanding the feelings and perspective of others, whether clients and customers or internal constituencies.
Leveraging diversity	Utilizing differences as opportunities.
Political awareness	Understanding salient economic, political and social trends.
Influence	Adeptness at persuasion strategies.
Building bonds	The strength of personal links between far-flung people and parts of the organization.

*Note.* Adapted from "Working with emotional intelligence," by D. Goleman. pp. 282-283. Copyright 1998 by Bantam Books.

**Appendix K The Five Disciplines of the Learning Organization**



*Note.* Adapted from "The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization," by P. M. Senge. pp. 375-376. Copyright 1990 by Doubleday.

**Appendix L Maxwell’s Six Measurements of a Vision**

<b>A Moral Compass (Look Above)</b>	There is only one true north. If your compass is pointing in any other direction, your team is headed the wrong way. A moral compass brings integrity to the vision.
<b>An Intuitive Compass (Look Within)</b>	Where integrity brings fuel to the vision, passion brings fire. And the true fire of passion and conviction comes only from within.
<b>A Historical Compass (Look Behind)</b>	A compelling vision should build on the past, not diminish it. It should make positive use of anything contributed by previous teams in the organization. People won’t reach for the future until they have touched the past.
<b>A Directional Compass (Look Ahead)</b>	Part of this direction comes from a sense of purpose. Another comes from having goals, which bring targets to the vision. A goal motivates the team.
<b>A Strategic Compass (Look Around)</b>	A goal won’t do the team much good without steps to accomplish it. Vision without strategy is little more than a daydream. The value of a strategy is that it brings process to the vision. It identifies resources and mobilizes the members of the team.
<b>A Visionary Compass (Look Beyond)</b>	The vision of the team must look beyond current circumstances and any obvious shortcomings of current teammates to see the potential of the team. A truly great vision speaks to what team members can become if they truly live out their values and work according to their highest standards.

*Note.* Adapted from “The 17 indisputable laws of teamwork: Embrace them and empower your team,” by J. C. Maxwell. pp. 92-95. Copyright 2001 by Thomas Nelson.

## GRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

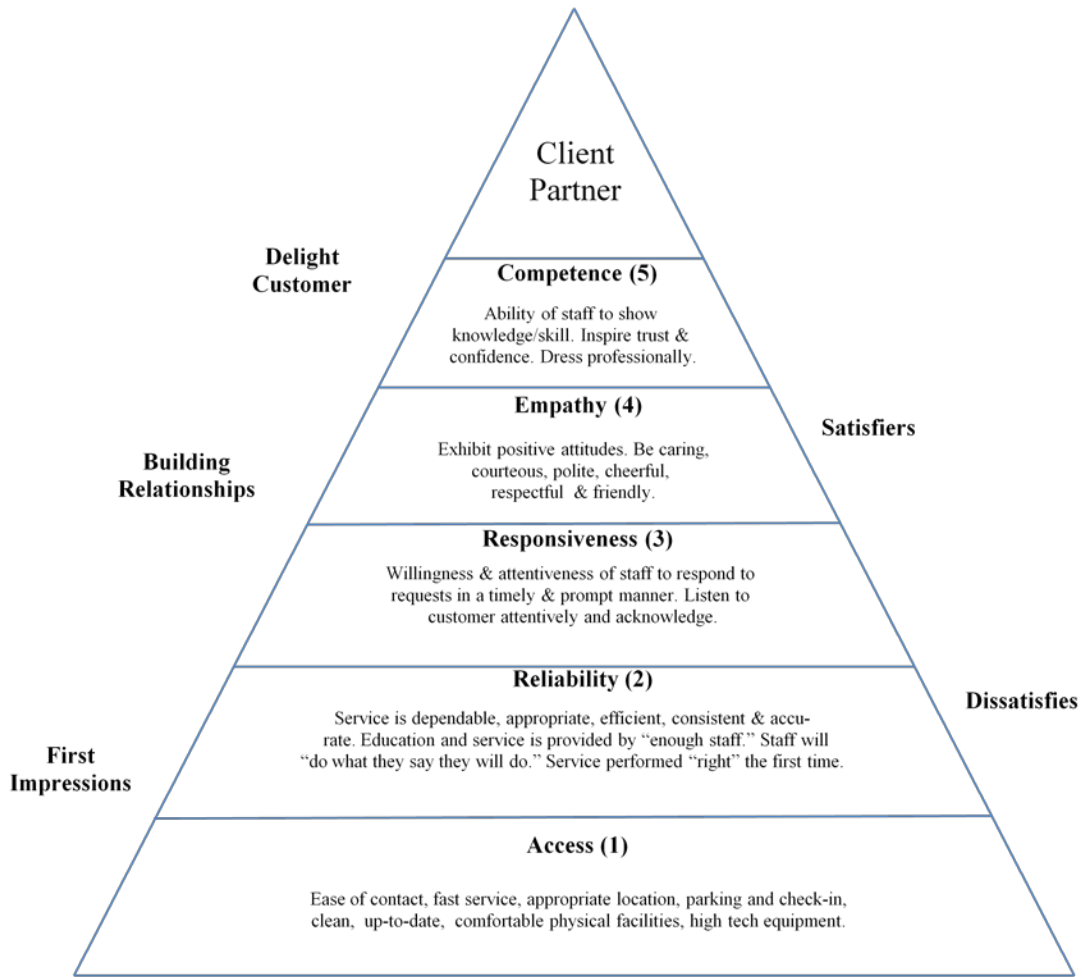
### Appendix M Maxwell's Vision Checklist

Clarity:	Brings understanding to the vision (answers what the people must know and what I want them to do)
Connectedness:	Brings the past, present, and future together
Purpose:	Brings direction to the vision
Goals:	Brings targets to the vision
Honesty:	Brings integrity to the vision and credibility to the vision caster
Stories:	Brings relationships to the vision
Challenge:	Brings stretching to the vision
Passion:	Brings fuel to the vision
Modeling:	Brings accountability to the vision
Strategy:	Brings process to the vision

*Note.* Adapted from "The 17 indisputable laws of teamwork: Embrace them and empower your team," by J. C. Maxwell. p. 101. Copyright 2001 by Thomas Nelson.

**Appendix N Vandelaar's Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy Model**

**Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy**



Source: VVV Research & Development Inc. 2009

Note: Reprinted by permission from VVV Research and Development, Inc. 2009

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**Appendix O Interviewee Demographics**

Participant Demographics/ Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	M	F	M	M	M	F	M	M	F	M
Age	50-59	40-49	50-59	40-49	40-49	50-59	60-69	30-39	30-39	50-59
Masters/ Doctorate	D	M	D	D	D	D	D	D	M	M
Years since degree	10-20	10-20	10-20	5-10	10-20	3-5	10-20	< 3	5-10	50-10
GPA	3.8-3.9	3.8-3.9	3.8-3.9	4.0	3.8-3.9	3.8-3.9	3.8-3.9	4.0	4.0	4.0

Participant Demographics/ Number	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Gender	M	M	F	M	F	F	F	F	M	M
Age	50-59	50-59	50-59	50-59	30-39	40-49	40-49	40-49	50-59	30-39
Masters/ Doctorate	M	M	D	M	M	M	M	D	M	D
Years since degree	10-20	> 20	< 3	> 20	3-5	10-20	< 3	3-5	> 20	10-20
GPA	4.0	3.8-3.9	3.8-3.9	3.5-3.7	3.8-3.9	3.5-3.7	3.8-3.9	4.0	3.8-3.9	4.0

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**Appendix P Attribute Characteristics Identified**

<p><b>Competency</b> capable skilled knowledgeable expert educated</p>	<p><b>Provide Guidance</b> leadership direction supervision help assistance practical proactive</p>	<p><b>Measurements</b> measure assess evaluate testing quantify data</p>	
<p><b>Relationship building</b> association connection bonding recognition partnership mentor</p>	<p><b>Values</b> principles standards ideals reputation quality</p>	<p><b>Responsive</b> open approachable quick to respond receptive friendly</p>	
<p><b>Accessibility</b> availability easily reached easy to get to obtainable on hand</p>	<p><b>Support system</b> hold up sustain maintain funding confirm</p>	<p><b>Empathy</b> understanding appreciative positive respectful caring considerate</p>	
<p><b>Consistency</b> reliable dependable well-organized disciplined efficient clear on requirements</p>	<p><b>Trustworthy</b> faithful honorable truthful honest constant trust</p>	<p><b>Credibility</b> trustworthiness integrity authority sincerity</p>	<p><b>Loyalty</b> allegiance constancy commitment</p> <p><b>Follow-through</b> Follow-up unfailing feedback</p>



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**Appendix Q Attributes versus Interviewee Count**

Attribute/ Subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Totals
Competency		8	6	2	5	3	6	8	16	6	4	11	4	10	19	10	6	4	9	9	146
Guidance	8	5	3	8	2	3	6	8	8	3	4	10	11	1	9	7	10	4	6	9	125
Measurements	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	5	4	5	1	15	1	7	11	4	2	9	13	6	97
Relationship Building	3	5	5	2	1	5	1	6	7	2	6	6	9	2	2	3	3	17	5	4	94
Values	1	3	5	1	3	2	2	3	2	3	1		3	5	8	9	2	3	13	13	82
Responsive	2	3	6	6	2	9	1	2	8	10	1	1	3	1	4	1	3	3	4	5	75
Availability	1	3	11	3	5	6	3	3	2	7	4	3	2	1	5	1	3	6		3	72
Support Sys	4	5	5	1		8	1		1		6	7	2		1	6	6	3	1	1	58
Empathy	5	2	1		1	4	1	2	7		1		3	1	4	5		5	1		43
Consistency	1		4		2	1	1		2	3	1			1	3		3	1		5	28
TCLFT*		1	2	2				1	2			1		2	3			7		6	27
Teams			6	3					3		1					5	1				19
Culture				4		1	1	2								1			3		12
Motivation		1	1	1					2	2			1			1					9
Engagement								1							2		1				4
Empowerment																					0
Totals	27	38	57	36	22	44	25	41	64	41	30	54	39	31	71	53	40	62	55	61	

\* TCLFT = Trustworthy, Credible, Loyal, and having Follow-through

**Appendix R Revised Model of Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy**

3D Customer Satisfaction Hierarchy

