



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 12**

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Asking About the Quality of Services

In this chapter, “service” refers to the value and the quality of interactions, one side of which is imparted by the college or university. Staff and student interactions are of primary consideration, but other contacts (including staff with other staff, staff with faculty, and administrators with community leaders, for example) fall within our concerns here. A service plan sets standards for how students and others are treated in an interaction as well as standards for the usefulness of that treatment.

Interactions may be face-to-face or online. As more and more students, staff, faculty, and community members are now being served over the Web, college or university planners should set strategies for the value and quality of these interactions as well. The cheer of the person at the bursar’s window is not all that defines a college’s level of service. The usefulness of the result, the “ease of navigation” of the institution’s Web site, and concern for the individual shown in each interaction also reveal a college’s performance.

For many years colleges and universities were content to just “let service happen.” The style of interaction was derived from the surrounding culture. We know that service in eastern big cities was “rougher” than the service provided in the south. Now, however, service must be strategic; the quality of service reflects the quality of the institution. The interaction between the college’s “service providers” (whether faculty or clerks) and recipients of the service must sincerely reflect the values of the institution. It must also appeal to the “customers” who have their own very real ego needs. As tuition has gone up, the value that students place on their time has gone up as well. As competition among institutions has increased, the importance of service has also become greater than before. To be silent on standards for service is to neglect an important facet of institutional strategy.



It is difficult, however, to move service providers away from the norms of the surrounding culture. Training sessions are rarely sufficient. Skills can be improved, but better motivation is too often only exhorted. Institutional staff members respond better when the need for higher levels of service is clear. Clarity comes when responsive service can be shown to be a fundamental part of the strategic direction of the college or university. Nevertheless, when institutions find that they are still unable to provide expected levels of service, because of ingrained attitudes, lack of resources, or inadequate management experience, they turn to outsourcing.

Service Standards

Trustees can help an institution understand the need for service standards. They can point out the need to have these standards well integrated with all institutional strategies, and they can review policies with an eye toward the impact on service provision. Policies that do not allow any discretion to front-line service providers and that do not have any appeal process for “customers” who feel they have been wronged may not accurately reflect the institution’s service strategy.

Planners of institutional service should describe intentions for the quality of service, and may describe needed training. They also should describe the methods that will be used to assess service quality.

What is the institution’s service strategy? In other words: Do we treat people right? All strategies are broad outlines of the kinds of actions that foster goal achievement. College and university visions—the visual descriptions of goal achievement—have many elements describing future institutional quality. The ways that people are to be treated should not contradict the overall vision of quality. Institutional vision should lead students, faculty, and staff to expect assistance with problems, courtesy, and sincerity. This does not mean that institutions should solve all problems. It means that, at a minimum, all problems should be taken seriously. A clear strategy moves the institution toward its vision within the constraints of its resources.



The highest levels of college or university leadership should signal the importance of quality service. Training needs to focus on service and the limits of service. All student financial problems would be solved if higher education were free. At most institutions this is not possible. A careful service strategy defines the scope of discretion for service providers and, without dismissing the importance of problems such as stretched student finances, includes policies that protect the institution.

How is service quality being assessed? In other words: Do we know how our students are being treated? That there are many options when it comes to the style and quality of service provision is a new concept to higher education. Intimacy, intrusion, responsibility, vocabulary/tone, and education/maturity are all elements that should be considered. Assessment can be more precise if the institution can develop policies and standards along each dimension. Knowing when a first name should be used is an intimacy concern. Understanding when to use more direct outreach is an intrusion dilemma. Finding the right times when a person with a problem can be sent elsewhere is a responsibility question. Vocabulary/tone concerns the question of unintended condescension. Determining when staff should try to teach students valuable life lessons or just solve their problems is an education question. Staff members with daily interactions become frustrated when there are no policies that can help them develop service at the right points along the dimensions above. They plead, often very quietly, for guidance.

Those charged with leading the development of a service strategy should be ready for complexity. Assessment should address more than whether the person feels satisfied after the interaction. The institution should be matching its service standards to its strategic direction and should be measuring the quality of service along many dimensions.

Comparing Internal and External Service

As outsourcing of services has become a more common option for many institutions, the path to improved internally provided services has been clarified. If



nothing else, internal units begin to understand the need for standards and high ones at that. The contract for an outsourced service usually contains service-level guarantees. For example, those vendors that run computing services can be held to up-time (keeping the computers running) and response-time (when things do go wrong) standards. Vendors are available to clean and maintain facilities, run energy plants, provide food service, provide bookstores, guide software installations, pay bills, do payrolls, and even answer phone inquiries about financial aid. If accountability for these services when outsourced is maintained by contractual service-level obligations, then in-house service provision can be guided by the same principles.

Often, an outsourcing contract is large enough to require board approval under the bylaws of the college or university. These occasions are opportunities not only to examine the quality of the institution's outsourcing decision process, but also to better understand the institution's service strategy. If the case for outsourcing is well developed, the trustees should then turn their attention to the contract. Up until a few years ago, college and university administrations had limited exposure to creating good service contracts. Some contracts were little more than weak vendor promises to do a good job (with carefully crafted payment and automatic contract-extension terms). Trustees can help administrators build contract sophistication.

What factors have lead to outsourcing as an option? In other words: How will we know when we have failed? The college or university should be developing standards of effectiveness for internally provided services to judge the services and make improvements. If improvements stall before coming up to standard, then outsourcing becomes a more attractive alternative. The reasons most often given for outsourcing a function are to save money or to improve a service (or offer it at all). There are times, however, when the impetus to outsource stems from an administration's frustration at effectively managing the function. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Many functions have become specialized, relying on special labor markets, training, and experience. Often, turning to a vendor for a function allows institutional leaders more time to concentrate on improving core functions, such as instruction, research, and service. When outsourcing is examined as the solution to a problem, trustees should be aware of the



basis of the problem and understand that higher education administrators are supposed to have skills different from those of executives in the commercial sector.

How will we assess the services provided by the vendor? In other words: Do we have a good contract? This question once again asks about assessment and standards. If the college or university has previously provided this service, trustees should be shown how the contract guarantees performance superior to that provided internally in the past. Trustees should be shown an outline of the college's expectations and should have confidence that contractual sanctions are strong enough. These standards must be measurable and auditable.

What cost reductions are contractual? In other words: Are the cost savings guaranteed? While not all outsourcing is done to save money, efforts with that focus should have contractually guaranteed savings. The vendor must be able to show how costs will be measured and that outsourcing will be financially beneficial. The college or university should not allow the vendor to include as savings existing costs that would abate even without the contract.

What is our control over the managers the vendors bring in? In other words: How easily can we have a bad manager replaced? The college or university should have contractual control over vendor, on-site managers, including a role in the manager's evaluation. A good response will also indicate the degree of integration of the manager into college organization. For example, when computing is outsourced, the vendor's on-site manager may be regarded as the college's chief information officer and meet regularly with the president's executive staff. Answers to the question: "Who's managing the manager?" should indicate clear lines of authority.

What do vendor customers (especially those the vendor has neglected to mention) say about them? In other words: How do we know that these guys will perform? What are the vendor's strengths and weaknesses? Outsourcing is often a disruptive and expensive endeavor. The process of evaluation must be beyond reproach.



What are the employment assistance plans for any employees that may be displaced? In other words: What is the human cost of this decision? One of the great challenges of outsourcing an existing function is to deal responsibly with employees formerly performing that function. Trustees should be assured that the plans for those who are displaced are consonant with college and board values.

Much of the guidance available to colleges and universities on strategic planning neglects the development of a service strategy. It is contradictory to have a mission and strategy “valuing every student as an individual,” when in actuality the college has a service level that requires a student to spend six hours registering, receiving financial aid, and paying. Strategic intentions and performance may collide as well if distance-education students cannot receive online the same services as on-campus students receive.

The option of outsourcing the provision of a service forces hard questions about the efficiency and the effectiveness of the current service. The development of service standards can also push the process of allocating resources. Trustees have the opportunity to guide the institution toward the right level of investment for the provision of strategic levels of service.