

**Why College Professors Should Also Consider Their Students as Clients: The Role of Exceptional Service and Engagement in Higher Education****Charles J. Priolo, Ph.D.** 

Assistant Professor of Human Resource Management

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6487-4370>Email: [charles.priolo@touro.edu](mailto:charles.priolo@touro.edu)

Touro University Graduate School of Business

USA

**Chenelle A. Pulido**

Touro University Graduate School of Business

USA

**ABSTRACT**

*The evolving landscape of higher education has intensified the need for college professors to adopt a service-centered approach to teaching. Rising tuition costs, increased student diversity, digital learning environments, and shifting expectations have reframed students as stakeholders. They require clear communication, responsiveness, and supportive engagement. This paper examines the importance of excellent client service in higher education and argues that service-oriented teaching enhances student engagement, retention, satisfaction, and academic success. Drawing on research in pedagogy, organizational behavior, and student development, the paper demonstrates that these types of service principles—when properly defined—align with academic values and strengthen institutional outcomes. The paper concludes with practical strategies for faculty and implications for the future of higher education.*

**Introduction**

Higher education has undergone significant transformation over the past several decades. Once characterized for all intents and purposes by a one-directional transmission of knowledge, the modern university now operates within a competitive, student-centered environment shaped by rising tuition costs, technological innovation, and increased accountability (Altbach, 2016). As a result, the relationship between professors and students has shifted. Students are no longer passive recipients of instruction; they are active participants and stakeholders whose experiences influence institutional reputation, retention, and learning outcomes.

The concept of *client service* in academia is often controversial. Critics argue that it commodifies education or undermines academic rigor (Bunce et al., 2017). However, when properly understood, client service does not imply that students are always right or that faculty must lower standards. Instead, it emphasizes professionalism, clarity, responsiveness, and respect—qualities that support student learning and align with the mission of higher education. This paper postulates that professors should adopt a high level of client service in their interactions with students, not as a commercial practice but as a pedagogical and ethical imperative.

**Defining Customer Service in Higher Education**

To be clear, client service in higher education differs from its commercial counterpart. It does not position students as consumers whose preferences dictate academic decisions. Instead, it refers to behaviors that facilitate learning, including clear communication, timely feedback, empathy, and accessibility (Berry, 2019). These behaviors are consistent with established principles of effective teaching (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

A strong and meaningful client service-centered approach emphasizes:

- Transparent expectations

- Respectful communication
- Timely responsiveness to student inquiries
- Supportive guidance
- Professional conduct

Such practices enhance the learning environment and contribute to student success.

**The Changing Landscape of Higher Education*****Rising Tuition and Student Expectations***

Tuition costs have risen dramatically, prompting students and families to view higher education as a major financial investment (Ma et al., 2023). With increased financial pressure comes heightened expectations for quality instruction and supportive faculty interactions. Research shows that students who perceive faculty as responsive and caring report higher satisfaction and stronger academic outcomes (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

***Increasing Student Diversity***

Contemporary college populations include first-generation students, adult learners, international students, and individuals balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. This diversity requires faculty to adopt flexible, empathetic, and inclusive approaches (Museus, 2014). Effective client service principles—such as active listening and cultural sensitivity—help faculty meet the needs of diverse learners.

***Digital Transformation and Online Learning***

The rise of online and hybrid learning environments has increased the importance of clear communication and timely responses. In digital settings, faculty accessibility and clarity are strongly correlated with student satisfaction and persistence (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018). Given these and other factors, outstanding client service behaviors are essential for effective online teaching.



### *Client Service and Student Success*

There is a very viable correlation between effective client service and the success of an academic institution's students. Students are the "clients" we serve, and as such, academicians need to recognize that they must do everything possible to guide, mentor, encourage, train, and support students, whether through one-on-one coaching, group training, sponsoring of mentorship relationships between "professor and student", and more.

### **Enhancing Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a key predictor of academic success (Kuh, 2009). Faculty who demonstrate care, responsiveness, empathy, and enthusiasm foster stronger engagement. Positive faculty–student interactions increase motivation, participation, and persistence (Tinto, 2012).

#### *Improving Retention and Graduation Rates*

Retention is influenced by students' sense of belonging and perceived institutional support. Faculty interactions play a central role in shaping these perceptions (O'Keefe, 2013). Customer service behaviors—such as timely feedback and respectful communication—strengthen students' connection to the institution.

#### *Supporting Mental Health and Well-Being*

College students face rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (American College Health Association, 2022). While professors are not mental health professionals, empathetic communication and reasonable flexibility can reduce academic stress and promote well-being. Supportive faculty interactions are linked to improved mental-health outcomes (El Ansari et al., 2014).

#### *Professors as Institutional Representatives*

Faculty interactions shape students' perceptions of institutional quality. Professors serve as "ambassadors" of the university, and their professionalism influences student satisfaction and institutional reputation (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

#### *Modeling Professional Behavior*

Good client service skills—communication, punctuality, and empathy are essential in all professional fields. When professors model these behaviors, they prepare students for workplace expectations (Weimer, 2013).

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Education is fundamentally a service profession. Faculty have an ethical obligation to support student learning through fairness, respect, and transparency (Bok, 2017). Thus, good client service principles reinforce these ethical commitments.

### **Concerns About Client Service in Academia – Some Myths**

#### ***Concern: "Client (customer) service lowers academic standards."***

Research shows that supportive teaching does not reduce rigor; instead, it increases student achievement by improving clarity and motivation (Ambrose et al., 2010). High expectations and high support can coexist.

#### ***Concern: "Education is not a business."***

While education is not a commercial enterprise, it involves service delivery. Recognizing students as stakeholders does not diminish academic integrity; it enhances institutional effectiveness (Schneider & Deane, 2015).

#### ***Concern: "Client service encourages entitlement."***

Entitlement arises from unclear expectations, not from respectful communication. In fact, when professors utilize effective

client service, research has shown that this reduces entitlement by establishing transparent policies and consistent boundaries (Chowning & Campbell, 2009).

### **Practical Strategies for Faculty**

#### ***Clear Communication***

- Provide detailed syllabi
- Explain grading criteria
- Use consistent instructions

Clear communication reduces confusion and improves performance (Nilson, 2016).

#### ***Timely and Respectful Responses***

Students value prompt replies and constructive feedback. Timeliness is strongly associated with student satisfaction (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018).

#### ***Accessibility and Approachability***

Flexible office hours, virtual meetings, and a welcoming demeanor increase student help-seeking behaviors (Komarraju et al., 2010).

#### ***Empathy and Understanding***

Empathy fosters trust and improves academic outcomes (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

#### ***High-Quality Feedback***

Effective feedback is specific, actionable, and timely. It is one of the strongest predictors of learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

#### ***Institutional Benefits of Good Client Service Practices = Improved Student Satisfaction***

Student satisfaction influences retention, alumni engagement, and institutional rankings (Elliott & Shin, 2002).

#### ***Stronger Faculty–Student Relationships***

Positive relationships enhance motivation, confidence, and academic performance (Cox, 2011).

#### ***Enhanced Institutional Reputation***

Institutions known for supportive faculty attract more applicants and retain more students (Schneider & Deane, 2015).

### **A Student Perspective on Service-Centered Teaching in Higher Education**

While existing literature emphasizes the importance of service-oriented teaching from an institutional standpoint, the student experience offers an additional and often underrepresented lens. From the perspective of a graduate student, the concept of "client service" in higher education is not abstract or theoretical—it is experienced daily through interactions that directly shape learning, motivation, and perceived fairness in the classroom.

#### ***Financial Pressure and the "Lived" Student Experience***

Although rising tuition costs are often discussed in institutional terms, students experience them in deeply personal ways. Many students are not only investing significant financial resources into their education but are also simultaneously managing student loan debt, part-time employment, and personal financial constraints. In this context, faculty responsiveness and respectful engagement are not simply indicators of good teaching practice; they are perceived as an essential component of the educational value being purchased through considerable personal sacrifice. Research shows that perceived value and service quality significantly influence student satisfaction and institutional trust (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Brown, 2011).



From a student perspective, timely communication, clarity, and support are not “extra” services but integral to the legitimacy of the educational experience.

### ***The Alignment and Dynamics of Power in the Classroom***

A critical yet often under acknowledged dimension of the student experience is the inherent alignment and dynamics of power in the classroom between faculty and students. Professors hold significant influence over academic evaluation, grading outcomes, and in many cases, future professional opportunities through recommendations and references. This dynamic can discourage students from seeking clarification or challenging ambiguity, particularly when they fear negative academic consequences (Cook-Sather, 2014). Research on student voice and classroom dynamics suggests that psychological safety is essential for participation and learning (Freeman et al., 2014). A service-oriented teaching approach helps reduce this barrier by fostering an environment where students feel safe to engage without fear of punitive outcomes, while maintaining clear academic standards.

### ***What “Good Service” Looks Like in Practice***

While service-centered teaching is often described in broad conceptual terms, students experience it through specific, everyday behaviors. Studies on student satisfaction consistently highlight communication clarity, instructor responsiveness, and feedback quality as key determinants of perceived instructional effectiveness (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). From the student perspective, some of the most impactful practices include:

- Acknowledging student emails within 24–48 hours, even if only to confirm a follow-up timeline
- Providing clear explanations for lost points, rather than numerical grades alone
- Demonstrating active engagement during class sessions rather than relying solely on slides
- Treating student questions as legitimate contributions rather than interruptions
- Ensuring consistency between syllabus expectations and actual course delivery

These micro-level interactions often shape the overall perception of fairness, professionalism, and instructional quality more than formal course design alone.

### ***The Distinct Context of Graduate Education***

In graduate-level programs, particularly in business education, student expectations are further shaped by prior professional experience. Many graduate students enter the classroom having worked in environments where responsiveness, accountability, and clear communication are standard professional expectations. Research on adult learning theory suggests that graduate learners bring prior experience into the classroom and evaluate instruction through applied professional frameworks (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). As a result, faculty behavior is often implicitly compared not only to academic norms but also to industry standards. In this context, service-oriented teaching is not about lowering expectations; rather, it aligns academic interactions with the level of professionalism students are already accustomed to in the workplace.

### ***Mental Health, Academic Pressure, and the Role of Faculty***

While prior research acknowledges the relationship between empathetic teaching and student well-being, it is important to emphasize that students rarely explicitly communicate when they are struggling. Academic stress, workload pressures, and external responsibilities are often managed silently. Studies show increasing levels of anxiety and stress among college students, with many not seeking formal support services (American College Health Association, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 2013). In such cases, faculty members may serve as the first point of informal support. Small but meaningful actions—such as acknowledging workload intensity, showing flexibility when appropriate, or responding to missed deadlines with inquiry rather than immediate penalization—can significantly influence a student’s ability to remain engaged and persist through academic challenges.

### ***Reframing the “Entitlement” Concern***

Concerns have arisen that client-oriented teaching fosters entitlement are often rooted in misunderstandings of student expectations. Empirical research suggests that entitlement perceptions are more strongly associated with unclear expectations and inconsistent evaluation practices than with structured support or responsiveness (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). From the student perspective, most concerns are not centered on grade inflation or preferential treatment, but rather on clarity, consistency, and fairness. In this sense, a service-oriented teaching approach does not encourage entitlement; instead, it proactively reduces the conditions under which entitlement perceptions develop.

### ***The Modeling Effect of Faculty Behavior***

Beyond instruction, professors serve as behavioral models for professional conduct. Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn behaviors through observation of authority figures and role models (Bandura, 1977). From a student perspective, faculty behavior implicitly communicates what is acceptable in future workplace environments. A professor who demonstrates clarity, respect, and accountability reinforces these values, while inconsistent or dismissive behaviors risk normalizing the opposite. In this way, the influence of faculty extends beyond the classroom and into students’ broader professional development.

### ***Conclusion***

Good client service in higher education is not about treating students as consumers or compromising academic standards. Instead, it is about fostering respect, clarity, responsiveness, and professionalism—qualities that enhance learning and support student success. As higher education continues to evolve, service-centered teaching will become increasingly essential. Professors who embrace client service principles contribute to stronger student outcomes, improved institutional reputation, and a more equitable and effective educational environment.

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