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Enhancing student retention. A study in private higher education institutions in the South East of México

Fomentando la retención estudiantil. Un estudio en instituciones de educación superior privada en el sureste de México

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ABSTRACT

In a study I conducted in local private higher education institutions, it was observed that the most important reasons for student retention are outstanding personalized attention by tutors, school authorities, staff and professors, followed by the economic factor and academic achievement. So, quality in attention is the first step for creating a positive learning environment for students to engage in their own learning, making schools become places where talent and opportunities meet. Then, more than thinking in retaining students through financial strategies, marketing efforts or trying to amaze them with impressive buildings and facilities, there must be better academic tutoring and vocational orientation, less students per tutor and more effectiveness for solving their problems, also eliminating useless remedial courses. Close and frequent relation with school authorities is very important for enhancing confidence.

KEYWORDS: school dropout, higher education institutions, customer service, private education, school administration.

INTRODUCCIÓN

In my experience as a business consultant and a university business administration professor, I have asked three specific questions to different audiences. The first one is about the main purpose of a business enterprise. Most people will answer that it is making money, earning profits and fulfilling investors' expectations. However, those answers are incorrect because the main purpose of any enterprise (a business one, a school, a church or even a sports team, for example) is satisfying customers' needs and expectations with value. So, for a business enterprise, making money is just a result of a well done job, although money could be the most important purpose for the owners. Then, the way in which enterprises are seen must change from money makers to problem solvers and satisfaction achievers. This is consistent with Nevins (2019), who referred a change in perception issued by an organization called "The Business Roundtable", in which the main purpose of any organization is balancing the needs and commitments to all shareholders (employees, customers, suppliers, local

communities), instead of shareholders expectations, as it was thought before.

Another question generally asked is if business enterprises live from their satisfied customers. Again, the answer is no…they don´t live from satisfied customers, but from loyal customers. Achieving satisfaction is not enough! There´s no guarantee that a satisfied customer will come back, but if they get satisfied every time they are in contact with the organization, he[2] could become loyal. Pareto´s law is present in all of this in many business organizations: about 20% of their customers, who are the loyal ones, represent up to 80% of the profits. And trying to get a former loyal customer back could cost up to five times more than keeping him satisfied. But monetary reasons must not prevail over the most important: customers are humans, they have dignity and the right to be treated with courtesy and value. Building loyalty is essential for any organization because it´s a combination of attitude and behavior which will make customers keep operations with the same company

regardless of outside factors (Suchánek & Králová, 2019)

There´s a third question. Which is the reason for business enterprise success? There could be many answers, but there are three main ones:

1) **Technology.** This will depend on the kind of enterprise, from those which are too technologically operated, to the simple ones which just need a few things. However, as an average, we could say that business success depends only 20% on technology.

2) **Certifications and accreditations.** It´s important to be certified (for processes) or accredited (for schools and programs). However, it represents only 30% of business success.

3) **Employees.** Yes. Having the correct people is at least 50% of any organization success. Besides, human resources are difficult to imitate, so employees are a source of competitive advantage. At this stage, it is important to avoid confusions

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[2] In this document, "he", "his" and "him" also refer to "she", "her" and "her" respectively.

between employees, human resources and human capital (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2019). Human resources are not the employees, but everything the employees give the company for achieving organizational goals (time, production, motivation, knowledge, etc.). Human capital is not the employees, but the value of intellectual assets called competencies (knowledge + abilities + attitudes).

We could add a fourth one to complement that list, an it is resilience (Ayala & Manzano, 2014), which is the ability for facing the uncertain future with creativity and optimism, solving problems and overcoming adverse circumstances

All of the above is about business enterprises. How is it possible to be successful in a higher education institution? There are reports of students who drop out school, which leads to demotivation and low self esteem, as well as a waste of time and resources for them, but also a loss for the school.

However, there are actions to be taken to retain students, such as fostering emotional wellbeing, mental capacity, aid in case of financial problems, and social belonging (Hurtado, Hunt & Gardner, 2019).

Nobody wins with dropping out. (Barroso, 2014). Besides, most students do not express the reason for dropping out or changing school, so school administrators lack information for designing effective strategies to avoid losing students. So, the objective of this research was to identify the reasons that would make higher education institutions retain students.

Why is it important to study student dropout and retention?

Schools could be losing money trying to retain students lowering tuition fees, offering discounts or just investing in improving buildings. There are some institutions which increase marketing and promotion efforts, but when the student arrives, he could perceive that those promises are not real. It is important for institutions to invest in having the best attention possible, so students feel as part of it and not just as another number. It is not retaining students just because

they pay a tuition, but because they deserve to be taken in mind and the confidence placed by their parents in the institution.

The information presented in this work will help school administrators to make decisions for retaining students and help them not to leave school, but without the idea that schools are just business units. Besides, the information gathered here could also be helpful for business enterprises and other organizations with the corresponding changes and adaptations. In the South East of México, more than 20 higher education institutions could be benefited, helping students stay, continue and graduate.

A preliminary study. Why do students quit?

In a study performed I directed (Barroso, 2014) with 124 dropout students from private higher education institutions in the South East of México, the most frequent causes were: (1) avoidable, or (2) unavoidable:

- **Unavoidable causes:** there´s nothing the student or the school can do about them, such as change of residence, disease, family problems or lack of adaptation to the environment (if he´s foreign).

- **Avoidable causes:** those are causes able to be predicted and solved before the problems arise (proactive focus), like academic problems, family economic situation, relation with the school tutor, problems with professors and the relation with the Dean. So, the correct Dean´s leadership style is very important for creating a confidence environment in which the student could get identified with him, enhancing communication and help.

The most important reasons for dropping out were not economic problems, as it could be expected, but academic ones. It refers to students with lack of preparation for the university or with problems in class. So, remedial courses could help improve the academic performance, followed by the contact with mentors and the Dean. Having tutors (this is, professors who give orientation to students) is very important for helping

students if there are problems, but avoiding the student depend on them. Tutors must be professors with a positive attitude to the institution and a deep knowledge about the programs, systems and strategies for solving problems. In some institutions they are called "mentors", so there´s a mentoring program.

For keeping students at school, Barroso (2014) indicates that institutions must improve: (1) career aspects such as curriculum, course availability, adequate schedule, personalized attention, organizational environment; (2) accessible tuition, scholarships and payment plans are necessary, as well as exchange programs with foreign universities; (3) quality of professors, and (4) improve administrative processes, which means getting rid of excessive bureaucracy and increase efficiency. This is consistent with Hurtado et al. (2019) regarding the need for emotional wellbeing, financial problem solution and enhancing social belonging.

How to retain students?

I conducted another study in the second semester of 2018 to find how to retain students at school. The study was quantitative, with a descriptive scope and a non experimental (ex post facto) design (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). The method was deductive with field work and the gathering technique was a survey, with the corresponding questionnaire.

The participants were 154, from four private universities in Mérida, Yucatán, México. In the sample, 86 (55.8%) are women and the average age was 22 years old. As the study was general, there was no division because of the major studied. The four universities have the same conditions in general and are directed to the same socioeconomic segment (high income), all of them with a diversity of careers, exchange programs and language centers. One of them has more than four thousand students and is part of an international institution system, while the others have presence in the country and the campuses are approximately the same size, with about two thousand students each. Two institutions have catholic inspiration. The instrument was a questionnaire I designed and validated for the study, which was implemented with the help of a group of collaborators prepared for the task.

The results showed that the most important reasons for students to stay at the same school were related to outstanding attention provided by the academic tutor and professors, followed by school authorities and the administrative staff (see figure 1). This means that schools must improve their service quality and get rid of heavy bureaucratic procedures. Attention by tutors, professors and authorities is related to academic achievement because many of the dropping out reasons are avoidable, as it was stated in my 2014 study.
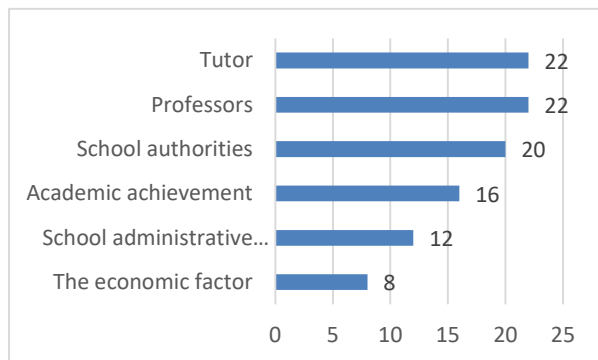

Figure 1. Needs of outstanding attention demanded by students (%)

Quality attention and service for keeping students satisfied at school

Quality in attention is the first step for creating a positive learning environment for students to engage in their own learning, making schools become places where talent and opportunities meet. And, according to the study, the economic factor is important, but it is not the most crucial because students in private institutions already know they have to pay a tuition fee.

More than attracting students through financial strategies, discounts, marketing efforts and impressive buildings and facilities, there must be a better academic tutor (mentoring) system, more effective vocational orientation, less students per tutor (there are schools with more than 50 per tutor!) and more effectiveness for solving students' problems. All of this must be with good academic level and eliminating useless remedial courses.

Offering the best service possible refers to meet and exceed students' and their parents' expectations, creating a great environment, enhancing in students a sense of belonging and confidence. It is incredible to know that there are schools in which students have never seen their Dean, or they may have seen him, but without contact. For that, institutions will require inspiring leadership, easier procedures and a

closer and more frequent relation with students, their parents and the most relevant members of society (government, enterprises an education). And for having the best professors there must be constant training, effective performance reviews and acknowledgement. Being accredited to a serious organization is also important, but that is just a measure for quality, not a synonym of it.

1) **To which extent are your students satisfied with the service provided at your school?**

1= Not satisfied at all

2= Not satisfied

3= More or less satisfied

4= Satisfied

5= Totally satisfied

2) **To which extent does your staff offer the attention your students (and parents) need?**

1= Their attention is unacceptable

2= Their attention is poor

3= Their attention is just acceptable

4= Their attention is good

5= Their attention is outstanding

Now, use your answers as coordinates and mark with an "x" the corresponding square:

Staff attention: horizontal axis

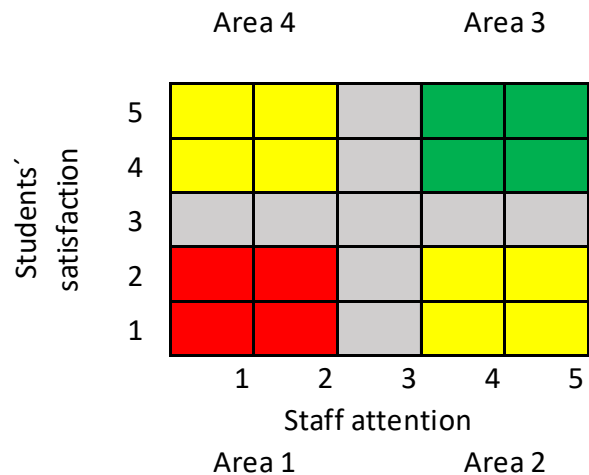Student´s satisfaction: vertical axis

Figure 2.   Areas according to staff attention and students' satisfaction

Now, there´s the explanation to the figure according to the areas.   Identify your area.

Area 1: deficient attention, low satisfaction.

This is a negative situation at school, and could be a reason for students to leave.

You must do something urgently for improving your service to students.

Remember that student dropout is not due only to low academic performance, but as Hurtado et al. (2019) indicate, emotional wellbeing could be a better indicator than financial problems.

Area 2: good attention, low satisfaction

Your school may be doing efforts for giving a good service, but it may not be the one required by your students (or family parents). It seems to be too much work towards an incorrect target. Even if things have been good in the past, lack of innovation leads to lo satisfaction.

Area 3: good attention, high satisfaction.

This is the desirable stage. There is a match between what the students (or family parents) need and what the school is giving them. It is time for maintaining competitive advantages and develop new ones. Opportunity for creating loyalty.

Area 4: deficient attention, high satisfaction.

Lucky you! Even though service is not good, students are satisfied. This could be because you are the only school in the area or because students (or parents) are not exigent. But be careful and don´t stay in a comfort zone because there could be another school willing to settle down in your area to catch your students. We can´t say there´s loyalty to the school in that condition.

As an important note, if you marked any 3, you are in the middle…and being in the middle is dangerous because you haven´t differentiated your school.

CONCLUSIONS

Many education institutions try to enroll students just through marketing efforts emphasizing modern facilities, cafeteria, air conditioning or prices. Professors are mentioned at the end of the list. However, higher education schools must invest more in their teaching staff and improving service, so students feel part of the institution and not just another number. An important effort must be made for enhancing a better attention from tutors, professors and

school authorities, as well as making administrative procedures easier. All of this in a frame of good academic level, inspiring leadership and enhancing social responsibility.

It is not retaining students just because they pay a tuition, but because they deserve to be taken in mind because they are persons. For that, keeping the best professors is a must.

As you could see, even though this article is about school administration, the exercise and conclusions could also be used in business administration. The best enterprises are those which offer an outstanding service and try to enhance loyalty more than just satisfaction. The better the service there is, the more contact with service providers and the easier the procedures are, the more successful the company will be. Do you agree?

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