

# Students as Consumers: The Need for Better Information

by Sara Green

The consideration of a student as a consumer of education is a relatively new concept. If a student is viewed as an individual seeking a product (knowledge and skills) that must be purchased (tuition and other costs) from among several competing markets (institutions of higher education), then identifying the student as an educational consumer is appropriate. Students, more than other consumers, invest not only money, but also a considerable amount of time and energy in obtaining a product. The report of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) (1975) states:

The age of 'consumerism' has coincided with the emergence of education as a business. Education has been sold to consumers who are seldom recognized as such. Laws typically refer to the educational consumer as a 'student', as a 'beneficiary', as a 'dependent' and so on. Students are educational consumers. (p. 8)

There are at least two groups that tend to reject this philosophy. The first group consists of those educators and others who point out that much of education is purchased with public funds--state taxes, scholarships, grants and loans. Therefore, they contend that the society at large is the true consumer of educational services. Others criticize the consumer theory based on the very nature of education. The consumer movement has attempted to measure objectively those aspects of education which are largely subjective and vary with the individual learner, i.e., personal growth, physical skill development, and developing a sense of purpose. Applying the consumer model may seem more acceptable if education is viewed as an interaction process between the teacher and learner, each assuming responsibility for part of the process. The teacher has a responsibility to provide quality instruction, supervision and guidance, while students must be held responsible to attend classes, complete assignments and study (Root & Miser, 1977). Stark (1976) notes the consumer movement seeks to balance and give "equal emphasis to student rights and institutional responsibilities" (p. 2).

While either position is defensible, it is of greater significance that these and other arguments have moved beyond academic debate and into the courtroom. Increasingly, courts are applying the rights of commercial consumers to student complaints against educational institutions. One widespread impact of court intrusion into discipline matters has resulted in the demise of *in loco parentis* on college campuses. Of more recent importance are the number of court cases that have established that the primary legal relationship between the student and institution is grounded in contract theory. Hammond (1975) further explains:

This theory assumes that the student and the university are parties to a contract, each

giving certain benefits and detriments in order to fulfill the agreement. The institution in advertising and seeking students, in effect, makes an offer to the student. The student, by registering, accepts. The student agrees to pay tuition and fees and the college agrees to provide instruction as delineated for the desired degree provided the student remains in good standing academically and abides by the institution's rules and regulations. (p. 29)

## IMPETUS FOR THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In reviewing the literature, there appears to be general agreement that the foundation for the student consumer movement was laid by former President Kennedy in his 1962 consumer message to Congress. In his address, Kennedy defined consumer rights as the right of the individual to be safe, to be heard, to be informed, and to choose (Stark, 1976). Today, these same consumer rights are being applied to students in the educational marketplace.

There is also an increasing awareness that as the traditional college-age population decreases, students will become a scarce commodity. There is concern that recruiting tactics will become overly aggressive and unfairly misrepresent institutions in a competitive race for students. On the other hand, students are demanding better quality service. The student clientele is changing--younger students have been granted franchise, the right to enter into contracts, and other adult responsibilities. At the same time, higher education is experiencing an increase in the number of older and part-time students who are more critical in measuring their time and money trade-off with what they can expect to receive in increased job opportunities and other objectives. Students, as well as their parents, look upon the years spent in postsecondary education as an investment from which returns are expected. However, in light of today's job market, students are becoming skeptical about future employment after postsecondary education.

The federal government has become a leading force in the movement for student consumer rights. Federal legislation has enabled more citizens to pursue postsecondary education by easing access and providing greater choice by making available federal funds to be used at both proprietary and non-profit institutions and colleges. "Portable dollars" in the hands of potential students may influence unscrupulous recruiting practices. The federal government also has a great concern that its federal aid funds are not abused by the recipient institutions.

Other factors that have led to the growth of the student consumer movement include: increased student involvement in university governance; the rapid growth in the number of institutions of higher education; a growing distrust in the legitimacy of decisions made by faculty and administration; the overall increase in costs; and a national concern for consumer rights in the wider consumer market.

## FOCUS ON BETTER INFORMATION

Often considered the primary potential consumer abuse, false and misleading information may also be the most debilitating. Despite the fact that much information about higher education is required by

federal and state agencies, little tends to be published or released in a form that might be useful to students (Stark, 1976). Dykstra (1966) stated:

Higher education, one of the most expensive investments made by many families, is still not covered by the types of protective legislation that guard the purchases of a dishwasher. . . . It is probable that in few other transactions does the consumer know less about the relative merits of the offerings of the different vendors. . . . Colleges often do little to clarify matters, and much to obfuscate. (p. 446)

The need for better information is largely related to the increasing number of persons who have been given the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education by means of federal financial assistance, as well as the growing number of postsecondary institutions. The decision whether to pursue education beyond high school and which institution to attend are important choices. The decision becomes more complex as the people who now seek postsecondary education have a greater diversity of interests. They must attempt to match themselves to a wider variety of institutions. And, as educational costs have risen and the prospects for later employment become uncertain, the economic consequences of such decisions have increased. The ability to match what the student seeks and what the institution offers can not be made without quality information on which to base a decision.

Inadequate information stands as a barrier to enrollment. Wren (1976) contends that lack of clear information on college opportunities discourages many students from considering college attendance. Any effort to improve a student's ability to make decisions about postsecondary education should consider the four steps of the decision-making process as outlined by El-Khawas (1977):

- (1) defining whether, when and how to pursue further study;
- (2) deciding on a program of study;
- (3) screening among a range of institutions to identify those that have the desired characteristics;
- (4) selecting which institution to attend.

These decisions can further be broken down into choices such as full-time versus part-time enrollment, vocational or general education, living arrangements, costs, and many others.

"Better" information, although a relative term, is indeed better "if it improves the ability of the students to make rational, informed decisions about postsecondary education" (El-Khawas, 1977, p. 16). "Better" information may be characterized as statements that describe the institution's special features, the use of empirical data, addressing the information needs of different types of students, and describing the kinds of experiences students are likely to encounter at the institution. It is hoped that the information on likely consequences of attending the institution will lead to better decisions, more realistic expectations, and thus increase student consumer satisfaction.

In a report prepared for the National Conference on Better Information for Student Choice, three major topics demanding attention were identified (El-Khawas, 1977). Information on costs and financial aid is of crucial importance in the decision whether and where to

pursue postsecondary education. Yet, state and federal programs are sometimes so confusing as to eligibility criteria that students often do not know whether they can expect to receive aid. Examples of how financial information could be improved include: illustrations of aid packaging; explanation of eligibility criteria; and a statement of estimated costs for courses, student budgets, and projected costs for four years.

The area of academic offerings and requirements was also identified as a major concern. Although catalogs and bulletins may describe program offerings, policies, and requirements, Task Force members emphasized the need of relating new information about student experiences, even on subjective aspects such as student views on faculty-student contact and the reactions of recent graduates to their education. Other information on academic offerings might include information on the interests and availability of faculty, and honest assessments of the relative strengths of each academic program. The third topic is that of "outcomes of attendance." This topic is often intentionally neglected by institutions for fear of exposing information that would not be beneficial to them. Data on academic, personal, and employment outcomes should help students develop more realistic expectations. More specifically, information should be available on the patterns of attrition and retention, ratings on student satisfaction with the programs, frequency of changing majors, and studies to determine if graduates are employed in jobs related to their major field of study.

#### STRATEGIES FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE

Consumer protection for students--at all levels--is predicated on the assumption that abuses can be eliminated if better information is provided, thereby enhancing the consumer's ability to make wise decisions. It appears that the federal government has provided the most initiative and is likely to continue to supply the impetus by establishing guidelines favorable to student consumers. Institutions must take action to stay one step ahead of federal regulations. The identification of needed improvements requires two steps: (1) assessing the information needs of students; and (2) reviewing the existing information for lacking or deficient content (El-Khawas, 1977). To collect the large amount of required information will necessitate commitment by the institution to coordinate all the segments of the institution that must pool their resources to provide various data. Perhaps task forces will need to be formed to scrutinize catalogs, handbooks, and other published policies that could be interpreted as part of the contract between the student and the institution and would therefore be liable to judicial action.

Students also have a responsibility if they expect to retain their credibility as educational consumers. El-Khawas (1977) recommends that students "ask questions about what is likely to happen as a result of attending an institution; inquire about the experiences of past students; and expect that institutions will increasingly attempt to provide detailed answers to such questions" (p. 80). Student consumers should also take an active role in pressing for programs that will assist students in evaluating the information provided by and about postsecondary institutions.

The FICE report (1975) indicates that the pressures for accountability and the various charges leveled against institutional ethics and credibility in its relationships with students are not likely to decrease. "Better information should be provided by all institutions.

particularly if the larger objective--of improving student ability to make rational, informed choices--is to be achieved" (El-Khawas, 1977, p. 76). Advocates of student consumerism must now begin to develop methods to test the central hypothesis of their argument: that information on likely consequences of attending the institution can lead to more realistic expectations and, in turn, to better decisions.

#### REFERENCES

- Dykstra, J. Consumer protection in the higher education marketplace. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1966, 47, 446-48.
- El-Khawas, E.H. Better information for student choice: Report of a National Task Force. (Conference review copy prepared for the National Conference on Better Information for Student Choice). Washington D.C., 1977.
- Federal Interagency Committee on Education. Toward a federal strategy for protection of the consumer of education. Washington D.C.: United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education, 1977.
- Hammond, E.H. Understanding the parameters of academic fraud. *NASPA Journal*, 1975, 13, 28-32.
- Root, W.R., & Miser, K.M. Consumer protection in higher education: A new responsibility for student affairs. (Workshop paper presented at NASPA National Conference). 1977.
- Stark, J.S. (Ed.). Promoting consumer protection for students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.
- Wren, S. The college student and higher education policy: What stake and what purpose? New York: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1976.

## An Interview with Dave DeCoster

by Anthony Zizos

*Basic career decisions can sometimes be a combination of external circumstances, intuition, luck...and a little planning.*

David Arthur DeCoster has been the Director of Residence Life at Indiana University for almost seven years. He recently announced his acceptance of the Dean of Students position at the University of Nebraska starting in March, 1978. This interview will hopefully provide my colleagues the opportunity to become better acquainted with Dave, and further understand the process of professional development.

- Q. *Where did you complete your undergraduate work, and what experiences during that time did you have in the area of student personnel?*
- A. I began college study at the University of Michigan in mechanical engineering but, after my freshman year, I decided that this was not the field for me. That decision came shortly after my advisor informed me that the School of Engineering preferred that I didn't return! From there I went into liberal arts, and then found my way into the School of Education. I suppose that this change was a pretty basic decision in terms of career development. During this same period of time, my sophomore year, I was hired as a Staff Counselor, which is similar to the Resident Assistant position here at Indiana University. It was my experience as a Staff Counselor that primarily helped me to choose to enter the School of Education, and as I continued to work in residence halls, it also lead me to pursue a Master's Degree in Counseling and Guidance. Even after completing my master's work, I had not made up my mind in terms of teaching in public schools or some type of position in higher education. I had interviewed and was offered positions in both fields.
- Q. *Were your interviews for positions in student personnel work a result of contacts you made with Deans and supervisors while you were working on your master's degree at the University of Michigan?*
- A. No, we did not have the same type of program at Michigan as you folks have here at Indiana University. There weren't any people concerned about placement in the area of Student Affairs. After interviewing for public education, which occurs earlier than the higher education process, I caught a ride to the ACPA convention in Chicago with a supervisor of mine from the residence halls program. This was my first convention. No one had ever told me about these conventions, so for the most part I was quite naive. I hadn't formally registered for the convention or the placement process. Consequently, I wasn't allowed to interview there, but I did take down the relevant information concerning jobs that were attractive to me and Joanne, since we were to be married that same summer. After returning, we both looked through my notes, looking for a position in a warmer region of the country. That is what lead me to apply for a position at the University of Florida. Well, things seemed to be working out there, and they finally contacted me and said they'd like to arrange for a campus visit. I didn't have the money to fly down there and they didn't