

STUDENTS

What a University Can Learn From Wegmans

By Lee Gardner | JULY 24, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM



U. of Rochester

"Never lose sight of what's on the minds of your people," says Mary Ellen Burris, senior vice president for consumer affairs at Wegmans. The high-end grocery chain is one of the corporate models American U. is looking to as it seeks to reinvent how it interacts with students.

Looking outside academe makes sense because few colleges have rethought, from the ground up, how they work. When new students arrive at American, among many other colleges, they confront a complex aggregation of offices and practices. Many processes, such as advising, haven't been fundamentally altered in 50 or even 100 years, even as colleges serve a rising generation of students who find Snapchat and Amazon more intuitive than email or a course catalog.

When leaders at American began the university's Reinventing the Student Experience project last year, according to Jeffrey Rutenbeck, dean of the School of Communication, "the comprehensive nature of what we were trying to imagine was a bit easier to spot in the corporate world."

Many faculty members, and others in higher education, view the influx of business-style practices as an unwelcome invasion, arguing that corporate thinking undermines the altruistic values of academe. But the fact remains that an organization can do a good job at its primary mission, such as education, and still stand to improve how it serves those who benefit. Colleges facing enrollment problems and fighting for the best students have an incentive to give their students better services and a better experience. Doing a better job of meeting their needs can pay off with higher retention and graduation rates — and, down the road, more satisfied alumni who might be more inclined to give back.

A decade ago, the Cleveland Clinic noticed that while it had become renowned for healing "the sickest of the sick," according to Lori L. Kondas, senior director of the Office of Patient Experience, surveys revealed that many of those it had healed didn't enjoy their stays at the hospital. Since patient-satisfaction scores now figure into Medicaid

American University's student services weren't working the way administrators wanted. Students found the mix of offerings confusing. Too many alumni seemed lukewarm about their campus experience. So the provost decided it was time to blow it all up.

"I said, 'I'd like to start with a clean sheet of paper,'" recalls Scott A. Bass, the provost. "What would we do if we could do that?"

The question of how a university can reinvent the way it interacts with students outside the classroom has led American to an unlikely source for inspiration: customer-service powerhouses like Wegmans, the high-end grocery chain, and the Cleveland Clinic, an elite academic medical center.

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reimbursements, the clinic has additional reason to serve its customers well.

Through years of incremental changes, and much trial and error, the Cleveland Clinic transformed its culture and turned its patient-satisfaction scores around. "Patients First" became more than just a marketing slogan. Through training, and emphasizing its patient-centric ethos to new hires, the hospital worked to make the patient experience the focus of every employee, not just doctors and nurses.

At American, members of the Reinventing the Student Experience task force gathered similar insight from Wegmans. Everyone who works at the grocery chain, including those in the back office and on the custodial staff, is trained and expected to keep customer service foremost in mind.

Mary Ellen Burris, the company's senior vice president for consumer affairs, says one key to the approach is "being sure that you never lose sight of what's on the minds of your people." Listening to employees' concerns and ideas, she says, helps fulfill the promise that their individual contributions will help make the stores a better place to work, which will make them a better place to shop.

Wegmans and American do have some things in common, Ms. Burris says, particularly organizational silos that often compete for resources and attention. But improving the larger organization requires the participation and cooperation of all the people who are doing the work, Ms. Burris says, so that you don't have "a group of Ph.D.s figuring out how the person who cleans up the parking lot is going to do his or her job."

The importance of making each employee part of the effort to improve the organization has come up at almost every subsequent meeting of the task force at American, Mr. Rutenbeck says. "The kind of excellence you can achieve with technical proficiency is very different from the kind of excellence you can achieve if you build a culture that connects everyone to the same mission."

An App for That?

Particulars of how American thinks it might change its student services won't be revealed until this fall, but breaking down silos and improving communications are key topics under discussion.

As at many other colleges, student data at American are scattered across dozens of divisions and their databases, few of which communicate with one another in useful ways. A problem with a student's housing may lead to difficulties in class, but it may be weeks, or months, before faculty and staff members make the connection and find a fix, if they ever do.

Colleges also struggle to communicate effectively with their students, most of whom have grown up in a seamless world of apps and handheld reminders. "We send them an email, and they don't read the email, so we send them an email to read the email," says Mr. Bass, the provost. "This is where we are."

One innovation at the Cleveland Clinic that struck American's leaders during a visit there this past spring is a practice called "rounding." Derived from medical rounds, in which doctors and medical students tour a ward to examine patients, the practice involves members of the various departments gathering regularly to discuss what's going well and what needs improving. Department heads also assemble for their own rounding, going out into the clinic to talk to patients, nurses, and other staff members. Rather than allowing problems and dissatisfactions to fester, rounding lets staff members hear about them "and sometimes even solve problems right in the moment," Ms. Kondas says.

The visiting officials from American say rounding showed them how a focused, sustained effort to stay on top of incremental successes and challenges across an organization can make a difference. Mr. Rutenbeck says he's seen college presidents try similar efforts, "but they didn't stick with it, and they didn't push it" the way the Cleveland Clinic has.

American is pondering other lessons from corporate customer-service practices as it sorts through how it wants to rework some of its more hidebound functions.

Take advising: Instead of having students make a series of brief appointments with an adviser to ponder what they're taking next semester, what if they established personal relationships with an adviser before they even stepped onto the campus? What if advisers had tools that could populate required courses into students' class

schedules over years, not just semesters, plotting a more calculated and reliable path toward graduation? What if students had more frequent access to their advisers, and information about their degree progress — perhaps through an app?

Students now live in a near-constant stream of information, feedback, reminders, and prompts. "They have experience in every other part of their lives where they've got targeted, differentiated communication that comes just in time," says Teresa Flannery, vice president for communication at American. If students read articles online, they may receive messages reminding them that they can read only a few more articles free. But in choosing classes, they may sign up for their full allotment of pass/fail courses before they realize it. Students at American don't get that kind of information now, Ms. Flannery says, but focus groups suggest that "they'd really like it if they did."

Heavy Lifting

Treating students more like customers is not a new idea in higher education. "It's something you see in many places," says Kevin Kruger, president of the student-affairs group Naspa, "but it tends to be department by department." It remains a controversial idea, he adds, because it might make education seem like a product.

But tuition increases have led to higher expectations of colleges from students and their parents. If you're paying thousands, or tens of thousands, of dollars in tuition each year, you don't want a frustrating experience.

Faced with 21st-century students, the university has no choice but to adapt, says Mr. Bass. Like many private universities, American has diversified its enrollment in recent years, increasing the numbers of first-generation, Pell-eligible, and minority students — populations that often need help adjusting to college life. In fact, all groups of students enrolling at American these days are arriving with more needs than previous generations did. The number of students seeking mental-health services, for example, has multiplied. American had about 150 cases in which a student needed clinical mental-health services in 2010-11; this past year it had more than 700 cases.

Like the Cleveland Clinic, the university has seen indications that some of its alumni are ambivalent about their experience there. Surveys conducted in 2009 and in 2013 asked graduates if they had a chance to do it all over again, would they? Almost a quarter of them answered, "I'm not sure," Ms. Flannery says, which is "a striking thing to say after four years and a big investment, right?"

The hurdles that American faces in making extensive changes are daunting. Its Reinventing the Student Experience project was funded by a \$150,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. American will need millions of dollars, ultimately, to pay for the kind of transformation it has in mind. The university can pay for small numbers of staff members to start pilot projects, but the financial support of a major foundation or other external partners is a key component to a larger overhaul, Mr. Bass says, "and I don't have that at this moment."

The goal isn't to suspend students in a bubble of feel-good, but to create a 'positive experience, some of which is clearly challenging, but the right challenges.'

Remaking student-service systems, as well as the campus culture, would be easier at a smaller institution, notes Mr. Kruger, of Naspa. At a university like American, which enrolls more than 13,000 students, about half of them practices and attitudes over years.

Members of the task force say the most common question so far is, 'How will this affect me?'

Leading change, and persuading people of its necessity, is one of the hardest tasks. In academe, says Mr. Rutenbeck, dean of the communication school, "pushback comes with the territory."

American has tried to make sure that everyone on the campus knows about Reinventing the Student

Experience, and what the project aims to do, by holding meetings with administrators, faculty and staff members, and students. "We didn't want this to sneak up on anybody," says Ms. Flannery. Members of the task force say the most common question so far is "How will this affect me?" The concern is especially keen among faculty members.

Some faculty members at American have also expressed concern that creating a more responsive student-service system, tailored to students' needs, amounts to coddling them. Mr. Bass disagrees. What the approach represents is quite different from what he encountered when he attended college, when students were expected to "sink or swim," he says. The goal isn't to suspend students in a bubble of feel-good, but to create a "positive experience, some of which is clearly challenging, but the right challenges."

Reinventing the Student Experience is an "outstanding" idea, says Todd A. Eisenstadt, a professor of government and chair of the Faculty Senate, and one that most of his colleagues support. "It's the old dream of the single-service window that a lot of us who study bureaucratic process have always sought," he says.

He worries, however, that the approach might make some problems worse, if catering so thoroughly to students' needs ends up channeling them into the role of passive consumers of services. Students of this generation, he says, need encouragement to be "active inquirers into how to best learn what they most need to know."

Mr. Kruger endorses the view that colleges must do a better job of adapting to the changing demographics of incoming students. Many colleges will watch closely what happens at American, he says. If the university can make the type of changes it's talking about and "show real, measurable outcomes" in student success and satisfaction, other colleges will be interested, especially since American will have done a lot of the heavy lifting in designing a prototype and testing what works.

The payoff for the university could be huge. Satisfied students become satisfied graduates, says Jack C. Cassell, chairman of the Board of Trustees. If American succeeds in creating a new and improved student experience, he says, "we believe that there will be a huge benefit to us in the future from the feelings and the generosity of our alumni."

A good institution that manages to make the experience of navigating college more user-friendly also will develop a market advantage on the front end, says Mr. Bass, the provost. That "will be an institution that I believe parents will line up to have their kids come to."

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