Improving Career Services through Enhanced Experience Management

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Abstract: Over the past twenty years, many successful large businesses have shifted their business strategy toward enhancing customers' experience with a product or brand, and away from typical business concerns such as product quality, price, and market trends. They have done so in order to enhance customers' loyalty to a particular brand and to assure continued purchasing by the customer. Similar to the business world, universities are increasingly concerned with their ability to attract new students (customers) and to maintain their engagement and loyalty (assure students' persistence at and long-term relationship with the university). Customer (student) experiences with the University, now frequently referred to as 'experience management' or 'XM', are important factors in student success. This article describes XM within the business world and higher education, and how experience management can be implemented within career services offices to enhance overall student success. We provide a case study of innovative implementation of XM strategies within an American university career services office and then explore how other universities may implement similar XM strategies with particular emphasis on China.

Experience Management

Experience Management (XM) stems from the idea that consumers choose to purchase a product or service based on their overall experience with that product or service, as opposed to typical factors such as price, quality, etc. Recent decades have seen substantial interest in XM as large corporations and organizations have sought to enhance customers' overall relationship and experience with a brand. For example, key players in large industries such as banking, retail, transportation, hospitality, and insurance have identified key ways in which to enhance customers' experience, typically resulting in increased brand loyalty and profits (McKinsey & Company, 2017).

These efforts are notable given that 80% of CEOs believe their organization delivers superior customer service when data suggests that only 8% of customers agree (Allen, Reichheld, Hamilton, & Markey, 2005). Thus, closing the gap between perceived customers' experience and their actual experience has become a high priority for most organizations.

During the same timeframe, similar trends have emerged within higher education. Administrators and other university personnel have called for an increased focus on the student (customer) experience (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; Fontaine, 2014; Harvey, 2001; Peatman, Richardson, Soisson, & Boice-Pardee, 2017; Pitman, 2000; Steele-Figueredo, 2018). Researchers have found that students'

experience with student services, and the university at large, is directly tied to important outcomes such as retention, student engagement, and perception of the University, as opposed to purely academic factors such as teaching, majors and coursework (Raisman, 2013). Data gathered by Raisman and associates (2012) indicates that the most common reason for students leaving a university was the feeling that 'the University did not care' about them (25%). The second most common reason was poor customer service. The lived experience of students affects a university's ability to attract, retain, and graduate students which is especially crucial given ever rising costs of higher education, competition for students, and increasing accountability pressures (Deming & Figlio, 2016). As tuition, fees, and overall student debt have risen, universities are also being held more accountable for not only student learning but also additional important outcomes such as career placement (Palmer, 2015). With not only retention and completion of degree, but career success being increasingly prioritized, career services offices may fulfill a unique and valuable role in defining and improving the overall student experience within the university environment.

A Case Study: Implementation of XM within Career Services

Several years ago, the Careers and Experiential Learning office (CLE) at Brigham Young University, a large private university in the western United States, implemented XM strategies in order to enhance the overall experience of students and to develop a more positive brand and reputation among students, faculty, staff, and employers. Specifically, CLE implemented strategies to frequently and consistently gather feedback from all stakeholders regarding their needs and experiences, changes were then instituted in order to more fully meet their expectations. In addition, CLE leadership sought employee feedback in order to assess the overall

functioning of the CLE office. In this section, we cover major initiatives to improve CLE through XM strategies in the areas of peer-delivered services, relationships between employers and students, creation of new events, internal employee performance and satisfaction, the development and implementation of technology systems, and the overall student perception of the CLE brand.

Peer-Delivered Services

Students' experiences with peer-delivered careers services, general service related to resume development, job searching, and interview preparation, were some of the first areas of CLE to undergo XM examination. Students' perception of their experience were measured beginning in 2017. Although peer-delivered services had been available for many years, they were underutilized. Student XM data suggested that the model at the time, wherein students set specific appointments, was not effective. Rather, students preferred a walk-in/drop-in model where they could simply walk through the CLE office doors when convenient for them and have their needs met. This, and other feedback, led to the development of a 'Career Studio', a small subunit of CLE, which has an open-door service delivery model. Trained peer mentors are available any time the office is open and students simply walk-in, are greeted by a mentor who assesses their needs and purposes for their visit, and then generally a peer-delivered service is provided. Internal data shows that student visits have doubled, and in some months tripled, due to this change (J. Jones, personal communication, August 15, 2019). This focus on quick response appears to be meeting students' needs much more effectively. In addition, the Career Studio asks students to assess each visit—which forms a continual performance enhancement loop. Students report high satisfaction with the services, modifications, and improvements based on this continual feedback.

Employer and Student Relations

More than 1,000 employers come to BYU's campus during any given year. Together with CLE, these employers provide more than 350 information sessions, conduct nearly 7,000 on-campus interviews, and meet thousands of students at multiple career fairs. As placing students in well-paying jobs is an important outcome for the University and CLE, CLE works diligently to assure that both employers and students have positive experiences at these events. As part of an XM strategy, employers and students respond to short surveys regarding their experience after each event. CLE personnel have also conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups with both student and employer attendees. This data, gathered over multiple years, has enabled CLE to identify 'pain points' for both employers and students. CLE has been able to respond to both employer and student concerns resulting in continued growth in the number of companies recruiting on campus and the continued high level of employer and student satisfaction.

Examination of New Events

For the past several years, CLE has joined with a large retailer, J.C. Penney, in order to enable students to purchase professional attire at discounted rates prior to career fairs and 'interview season'. By utilizing XM strategies from the first offering of the event, which included monitoring of student attendance and immediate direct feedback acquisition from students, CLE has been able to identify the overall impact of the event (students reached) and ways to improve it. Data from 2019 indicates that nearly one in 30 students participated in the event—a surprisingly high number. Student feedback indicated that although students were generally happy with the event (4.1 out of a maximum of 5), they had many suggestions for improvement. These included: 1) increasing the amount of inventory and sizes available, 2) adjusting the timing of the event, 3) clarifying the nature of the sale and how to obtain sale prices, and 4) providing

additional dressing rooms, among others. In sum, by assessing students' experiences the CLE team has identified numerous ways in which they can turn a good event into a truly exceptional experience the next time it is offered. If CLE had not set out to gather this student feedback from the beginning, these types of feedback and suggestions would not be available and therefore these improvements would have been unlikely.

Internal Employee Performance and Satisfaction

When the new CLE director came four years ago, the CLE office consisted of a director and several full-time staff members with dozens of student employees supporting the mission and operation of the center. Each employee had a direct line of report to the director. The new director perceived that this loose organizational structure led to wasted time, energy, and human resources. She sought to gather suggestions and data from her employees to determine what opportunities existed for the creation of a more functional structure. She listened to her employees, gathered their input, and obtained and assessed data regarding their performance. Over time, this led to the creation of teams within the center, led by unit directors, each of whom reported to the director. Each person's strengths and interests were discovered, discussed, and respected, and these strengths were utilized to assign employees to the various teams. Current CLE employees who were interviewed about these changes indicate that they highly value their small teams. They believe the changes have led to more effective student services, which continues to motivate them to add value through their work and to do more. These strategies have also been applied to the student workforce, resulting in team and group changes with initial results being positive.

In addition to strategies used to develop this new management structure, the director continues to measure employee performance, to gather data through other sources including students, and to use this to effectively assess

employee performance. Each team member has specific analytics which they can access themselves--this enables much more direct and effective intervention with poor performing employees as specific, quantitative data is available as opposed to only anecdotal or subjective statements from others or supervisors.

Data Collection at Career Fairs

CLE produces four major career fairs during any given academic year, which attract hundreds of high-quality employers and more than ten thousand students. Prior to the implementation of XM strategies within CLE, the number of employers and students attending was the only metric by which career fair success was measured. For example, if 187 employers and 2,700 students (a rough estimate made by clicking a handheld device for each student who walked by) came to a career fair this may have been considered a success if those numbers exceeded those of the last fair. Although this number held some meaning, it was clear that more could be done. In order to more effectively gather data and to enhance the utility of the career fair, a decision was made to implement a 'card swipe' procedure which simply involved asking all students to swipe their student ID card through a small device prior to entering the career fair. The data collection produced two significant outcomes. First, CLE could now share with employers very specific and accurate data about the students attending the fairs. Employers could know how many students attended the fair, where they were in their academic training, their majors and academic emphases, etc. Over time CLE believes this will result in more satisfaction from employers as they know that thousands of students will encounter their business and that many of these students are in areas for which they recruit employees. The second benefit of this data collection was that experience data could now be gathered from student attendees--something that was not possible in prior years. Surveys are now regularly sent to career fair attendees, their responses are gathered, and changes have been made to improve the student experience. This approach has been deemed so successful that it has been adopted at other events held each week. Student and employer data is gathered, feedback is obtained, and then these results are distributed to CLE employees to improve the overall experience for students and employers.

Experience Management and Brand Building

Consumer attitude toward a brand generally consists of a utilitarian dimension, how well does it meet the consumer's needs, and an affective or hedonic dimension, how does he or she feel about the product or service (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Spangenberg, Voss & Crowley, 1997). XM strategies have helped CLE build a positive utilitarian brand, meaning students and employers now regularly report being satisfied with the career development help they receive. But what about the affective or hedonic dimension of the brand? How do students perceive the CLE brand? CLE wanted to promote the brand as positive and fun in the eyes of students. In sum, they wanted to create a more positive, hedonic response to the brand. They implemented multiple strategies to enhance the hedonic appeal of the brand, two of which will be discussed here, while also continually utilizing XM feedback and assessment to ascertain the outcome of these events.

Several years ago, CLE decided to offer a 'Career Fright' event to coincide with the American holiday of Halloween. Each year a theme is chosen, with a recent one focusing on Disney animated movies, based on students' interest. CLE decorated all of their offices from floor to ceiling with scenes from various Disney movies. All of the full-time employees, interns, and student employees dressed in costumes which represented various characters from Disney movies. During the actual event, students walked through various Disney scenes and were provided information about making the transition from university to industry. At the conclusion, students were each given a piece of

pumpkin pie (a traditional American dessert at this time of year) by CLE full-time employees. Over the three hours of this event, nearly 700 students attended and were exposed to CLE, their employees, and services. This is likely a record for any student service event on campus. Students reported that they came for fun and to get a piece of pie, but they walked away, in the words of one student, 'astonished' by what CLE had to offer. Of course, student feedback of the event is also gathered and utilized to improve the overall experience. This event continues to build the brand of CLE as one of fun and positivity.

CLE sought to also enhance the hedonic dimension of the brand with employers and other campus stakeholders. At Christmas time, CLE creates a video to send to employers, faculty, and university administrators. This 'video greeting card' is also posted on social media and associated CLE websites. These videos are, by design, innovative, fun, energetic, and entertaining. They show the personalities of employees and the CLE brand. They are a unique way to express appreciation for employers' support during the past year and a warm reminder of the relationship that CLE has built with them over the years. Many report that they actually look forward to the video each year and wonder what CLE will manage to come up with this year.

Current Status of Career Services and Experience Management in China

In this section we will review the history, growth, and current status of career services in Chinese universities. We will then make recommendations for ways in which career services may be improved.

Although Tsinghua University pioneered the field of career guidance and development as early as 1916, and more particularly in 1923 with the establishment of a vocational guidance committee (Sun & Yuen, 2012), it appears that the utilization of counseling strategies and theories common in the West has increased

dramatically since the 1990s. New policies and centers have been implemented nationwide. Zhou, Li, & Gao (2016) suggest that the most dramatic growth has occurred since 2012 during which the needs for career education and counseling were increasingly recognized. More professional counselors were trained, continued career supports were built, and international career forums were hosted. Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities and universities are now recognized as leaders in the current development/counseling field with other areas rapidly expanding (Zhou, Li, & Gao, 2016).

Along with expanded services and training have come enhanced assessment and reporting of career outcomes. Each Chinese university now publishes their 'Annual Report on the Employment Quality of College Graduates'. It includes detailed employment data and specific practices so that results can be examined by the public. For example, Tsinghua University's report demonstrates that they have invested much time and resources to make sure their students benefit from services. They offer many different career development courses, including online versions, provide guidance to various student groups, work to continuously enhance their technology platform, and provide many important statistics for employers and other stakeholders (Tsinghua University, 2018). At the home university of one of the authors, Beijing Sport University, similar data is collected and reported. The report examines undergraduates' employment quality, job search analysis, professional training, and career education. Some items consider students' employment satisfaction, the relationship between their major and employment, and their overall evaluation of career education and services.

These findings indicate that Chinese universities are making great strides toward enhancing the overall career counseling, development, and assessment of career services at their universities. They have achieved great results in a short period of time. At the same time, there appears to be little work in the areas

of specific XM strategy--meaning the rapid assessment of students' needs and experiences, and the utilization of this feedback to improve the services offered to students.

This lack of XM utilization may correspond to the general state of customer relationship strategies in China. Although this is considered a booming area of growth in China (Pasto, 2018), customer relationship management, and hence experience management, have really only begun in the past few years. The main customer experience event in China, the Customer Experience China Summit, is only in its fourth year. Technology tools such as Salesforce, which aims to enhance the customer-business relationship, have only been adopted within the last few months (Liao, 2019).

In summary, Chinese universities have made great strides in developing and assessing career services, yet much can be done to enhance the experience of students. Large businesses have joined in the effort to enhance the overall experiences of their clientele, yet most of this is in its infancy. By exploring and implementing XM strategies during this time of infancy and growth, career services offices can not only enhance the experience of their students but can serve as the beacon for other services to follow. The following section provides some recommendations for Chinese institutions as they consider the implementation of XM strategies.

Recommendations for Career Services at Chinese Universities

Over the past decade, Chinese universities have made great strides in offering more career services to their students; however, there remains much that can be done, particularly in implementing services and then improving these services through the use of XM strategies. Three areas in particular are important: 1) increased use of student peer mentors, 2) more effective technology, and 3) improved assessment strategies.

As is true in the United States, the number of full-time employees available to serve students is often less than ideal. Although some universities have student ratios below 1:500, which would be considered ideal, many others are at more than 1:1000, which does not enable career counselors to effectively serve students (Beijing Municipal Education Commission, 2015). As was found through XM evaluation at BYU, peer mentors can share much of this load. Through regular assessment and evaluation, they can effectively provide a full range of career services. This may have a secondary effect of producing a new generation of career counselors who develop expertise in this area at an early point in their education and career.

Chinese universities may also benefit from adopting or developing new technologies which then can be evaluated through XM strategies to enhance the student experience. Both utilitarian and hedonic improvements can be made. For example, currently in China employers and students can connect through webpages and career fairs; however, to the best of our knowledge, there is no central technology to enable this connection to form easily and directly. In the US, most large universities and thousands of employers have adopted either Handshake or a similar technology (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Through this platform, students can upload resumes, connect with specific job openings, apply for these jobs, arrange interviews, etc. A product like this could significantly impact students' and employers' ability to easily connect. Second, technologies in China could meet more 'hedonic' needs. Although they may be functional enough, our experience with students suggests that users perceive the available technologies as aesthetically boring or not user friendly. Many studies indicate that a beautiful design often predicts users' satisfaction with, and desire to use, a product (See Hasselzahl, 2004 for a review). Many products combine functionality with pleasing color combinations, excellent graphics, and clear displays. This consideration

needs to be addressed in career services technologies in China.

Career centers in the US have become more and more data-informed and data-driven over the past 10 years (Berlin, 2017; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Similar methods have been instituted in some areas of China, such as the Beijing Municipal Education Commission Report (Tsinghua University, 2018). However, much more can be done. Universities and career centers can develop multiple pathways and multiple methods of assessing student outcomes to both inform the services of the outcomes of events as well as student visits during the week, and the overall long term outcomes of services. Career counselors need more training in assessment. As frequent XM strategies are used, data will enable centers to improve their services and management will be more able to assess the overall utility of their services.

Limitations

University systems and student needs vary widely both within countries and across countries. Clearly American universities and Chinese universities are different in many ways, as are the cities, districts, and cultures that support them. Some of the practices explored in this article may need to be significantly modified to be useful for a specific university or culture. Each system likely has advantages and disadvantages that are beyond the scope of this article. Specifically, in regard to technology, change is rapid in both countries and hence much more in-depth research of potential solutions would be needed to identify and/or develop systems which could be implemented in China. Despite these limitations, XM strategies including frequent and systematic feedback acquisition and decision making based on that data will likely lead to significantly improved career services in China.

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