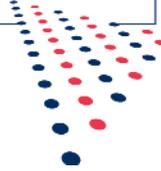


A HIGHER EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL ESSAY SERIES

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**



2006 SERIES: "CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE"

– ESSAY 7 –

Listening to the Customer

“Quite frankly, how effectively institutions have responded to the wishes of their customer base can be used to define which institutions are flourishing.”

DR. JERRY E. MCGEE

President, Wingate University

DR. JERRY E. MCGEE
President, Wingate University

Traditionally, institutions of higher education have offered academic programs, student support services, alumni participation events, cultural activities, and continuing education for community residents based on what campus facilities were available, which faculty or staff members were interested, and when it was convenient to offer them. For decades, this approach worked quite well; however, recent years have seen a more genuine attempt by more progressive institutions to offer programs or events that are desired by students, alumni, and community residents and in places and times that fit the schedules of the participants rather than those of the conveners. Quite frankly, how effectively institutions have responded to the wishes of their customer base can be used to define which institutions are flourishing, while other institutions which have been unwilling or slow to respond often find themselves with an eroding student population, minimal alumni involvement, and communities which are slow to respond when asked for their support. Therefore, the message to institutional leaders is clear—offer relevant, timely programming at convenient locations or the consumer will look elsewhere.

At first glance, this might appear quite obvious; however, only a small percentage of institutions seem to be intentional about finding out what their customers are looking for. Ways to gather such information are numerous, and while no one instrument seems to fit all institutions, several deserve consideration by those charged with designing programs to be offered to various constituency groups.

Some are very basic and quite simple to implement. For example, student satisfaction surveys can easily be distributed electronically or by simply having forms available at such places as campus dining facilities, the library, or throughout campus housing units. The value of electronic distribution is more institutional feedback and wider student participation. Likewise, alumni can be asked about their interests by allowing them to evaluate current alumni program offerings while making suggestions for new programs. It is just as easy to ask community residents who attend campus programs to evaluate the current offerings and offer their thoughts on other performances or programs they would like to see in the future.

Some of the most helpful information received by Wingate University has been achieved through a series of informal student dinners in which 10 to 12 freshman join the University president in the well-appointed executive dining room. After enjoying a meal and hearing very brief remarks from the president, the students are asked a couple of open-ended questions, which prompt informal discussion. On numerous occasions, the University administration has been able to answer questions, identify and clarify student misconceptions, and avoid confusion or potential unrest among these students

during their pivotal first year of study. By hosting these dinners, the president has an opportunity to meet a large number of first-year students and discuss such things as what attracted the students to the institution, how to improve the student recruitment process, how the new students' orientation process was perceived by students and parents, and how effectively Wingate University enabled these students to move through the impressionable first few weeks of school. As a result of these dinners, several significant changes have been implemented in an attempt to better acclimate new students to university life.

At the beginning of each academic year, Wingate University has found it effective for the University president to have a meeting with students, usually by academic class, to discuss the new year. Such things as student population numbers, new construction, new academic offerings, and social issues are discussed openly. Each group is also given some not so subtle information about the University's expectation of each group. For example, seniors are told directly that they are needed to provide leadership and a positive example for underclassmen. Freshmen are given information about the very direct correlation between class attendance and academic success. At the end of each session, those in attendance are asked for their thoughts on how to improve the University and are given a chance to ask questions. The program has proven to be a very good use of time and seems to greatly enhance the student experience.

Conversely, exit interviews with students leaving our institution have proven helpful as well. In every possible case, the staff at Wingate University tries to engage departing students in meaningful dialogue to better understand why students are leaving, and if there was anything the institution could have done differently to encourage them to complete their studies. While most are leaving for personal reasons, financial concerns, or poor academic performance, we have gained a great deal of knowledge which has been used to enhance the experience of future generations of students. In fact, on quite a few

occasions, after experiencing these exit interviews, students have changed their minds about leaving Wingate University or have returned to the institution at the beginning of the next semester.

A decade ago, Wingate University decided it could increase its service to area residents by offering a degree completion program and graduate degrees in business and education for working adults. Before the first class was held, the institution surveyed potential students to determine if there was sufficient interest. We discovered that there was more than enough students to make the programs viable; however, the classes needed to be offered in the evening and within 20 minutes of the work sites of the potential students. The program has been quite successful because University personnel listened to the thoughts and wishes of the prospective students before establishing the courses to be offered, as well as when and where to offer them.

University employee retention is also quite important and seems to be facilitated when employees feel that an opportunity for information sharing is available to them. It is nothing short of incredible how much inaccurate information seems to permeate the University faculty and staff. Very few things seem to foster low employee morale as quickly as poor campus communication. Of course, widespread use of broadcast electronic messages to all employees can be an effective way to communicate information, but the more this method is used, the less effective it seems to be. Very few things seem to be as effective as a periodic (perhaps once per semester) open forum for faculty and staff in which members of the executive leadership team take a few minutes to discuss what is happening in their area of operation and then take questions or otherwise engage those in attendance. Whenever a faculty and/or staff member has access to the plans of the University through such dialogue, campus morale and employee retention seem to be enhanced significantly.

Alumni and friends of the University no longer seem to find formal, sit-down meal events inviting. Due to the decline in interest in such functions, Wingate

University asked our friends what types of activities they would find worthy of participation. As a result, activities such as bus trips to professional sporting events, train trips, foreign travel, and visiting lecturers are now routinely planned and enjoy wide interest and participation. Of course, such occasions give the University staff more than ample opportunities to inform friends of the University about our plans and aspirations. Our experience has shown that alumni and other friends of the University are quite willing to voice their opinions, suggestions, and concerns about proposed institutional initiatives. It is worth noting that informed and involved University friends are more generous than those who do not keep abreast of the exciting plans of their related institutions.

The message sent by prospective students, alumni, employees, area residents, and current students is consistent and clear—inform them and seek their input if you wish to keep them interested, involved, and invested in the work of your institution.

Dr. McGee is a graduate of three universities and holds the doctor of education degree. He has enjoyed much success during a 30-year career in higher education, securing well over \$150 million in gifts and grants for scholarships, endowment, and campus development. His service as vice president of Gardner-Webb University, Meredith College, and Furman University has prepared him well for his current position as president of Wingate University. Under his visionary leadership, Wingate University has been recognized as one of the best small liberal arts colleges in the South and the premier small private university in North Carolina.

Dr. McGee is also an accomplished football referee, having officiated over 360 college games over the past 33 years. He is routinely selected for post-season assignments. Dr. McGee has also found time to be actively involved in his community. He serves as a member of the Board of Directors of First Charter Corporation, the Wilma McCurdy Trust, and the McSwain Foundation. He also is a past district governor of Civitan International. He recently completed a term on the NCAA Presidents' Council and as the National Chairman of the Football Issues Committee for NCAA Division II. He serves as Chairman of Union County's Economic Development program.

*In 2001, Dr. McGee completed his first book, **The Sitting and Talking Place**, which tells of his special relationship with his maternal grandfather. Recently, Dr. McGee received North Carolina's highest civilian honor—The Order of the Long Leaf Pine—in recognition of his extraordinary service to the state.*

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**



www.PresidentialPerspectives.org