

**PRESIDENTIAL
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2009/2010 SERIES: **LEADERSHIP IN THE GREAT RECESSION**

CHAPTER TWO

**CREATING A SERVICE-
CENTERED COMMUNITY**

Creating a Service-Centered Community

Dr. Mary J. Meehan: President, Alverno College

Perhaps the most important topic in higher education today is quality. One president recently said to me, “Not to worry about quality throughout every area of the campus is tantamount to institutional suicide.” Although colleges and universities have always been concerned with quality, only recently have we realized that improving campus-wide efficiency and effectiveness, including customer service, can make a difference in our very survival. The real problem has been, and remains, how to actually do it.

Customer service is at the foundation of every quality organization, and its accomplishment demands total commitment from every constituency on campus. Everyone must have the skills and knowledge to identify opportunities for improvement, focus on the opportunities at hand, determine strategies and solutions, and constantly monitor the impact of the actions taken. And good customer service requires the relentless focus of the institutional leadership team.

Often, one of the most significant roadblocks in building consensus on campus-wide quality goals is working one’s way around language that is off-putting in the academic culture. We frequently eschew words and phrases like “business plan,” “customer,” and “profit and loss statements,” yet we accept the public pressure to demonstrate that we are competent leaders of institutions that model best business practices. This tension needs to be addressed if there is to be meaningful buy-in and measurable results. This can be so challenging at some institutions that efforts can become diluted or limited to a few areas of the campus where there is a clearer connection to business operations. This is a recipe for failure, as quality can never be compartmentalized, and any attempt to do so simply reinforces the silo mentality that is so destructive to campus life.

“Customer service” does not resonate and inspire in the same way as building a “service-centered community.”

Case Study

Five years ago, Alverno College implemented a plan for the future that included the development of graduate degrees, increasing enrollment, enhancement of the student life program to support a planned growth in the traditional-aged population, and improvements to facilities. This plan was designed to take the college to 2012, the College's 125th anniversary, while addressing a critical need to build new revenue streams. With a combination of sound planning, a strong faculty and leadership team, a major donor, and some serendipity, the majority of this plan was completed significantly ahead of schedule, resulting in the desire to create a new bridge plan to take us to 2012. There was a strong sentiment on campus that, while the original plan needed to focus on revenue-generating initiatives, now that the financial pressure was less acute, the bridge plan should address other priorities having a direct impact on the quality of campus life.

As we initiated a new strategic planning process in 2008, we included a new goal, which we entitled "Servant-Centered Leadership." The name reflected our Franciscan values and seemed to capture the essence of our culture much more than "enhancing customer service" or "improving business efficiency." Very soon after sharing the draft, it became clear that the word "servant" evoked reactions far more intense than "customer" or "business operations." As a women's college with a very diverse student population, the word "servant" was not one easily embraced by a learning community studying and grappling with issues of discrimination and stereotypes.

The Alverno team spent many months discussing a precise, inviting way of addressing the learning culture at the College and articulating our aspirations. The team members' deliberations served as a learning opportunity and affirmed the process that resulted in a statement reflecting our philosophy of a professional culture:

"Each of us associated with Alverno—students, faculty, staff, alumnae, trustees and volunteers—are partners in creating a community of learners. We are a welcoming, professional community that values each student's pursuit of learning, which is at the center of all we do. This is supported, challenged, and nourished by a strong community. We have seen and are gratified by the success of the developmental and transformative nature of our students' experiences. Our community is sustained by our desire to continue providing an environment where all are welcomed and belong. Our students' successes encourage us to continue exploring the best ways to foster learning and the improvement in our work."

After agreeing on a statement of philosophy, the team used the name of our strategic plan, *Soaring to 2012*, as an acronym for our seven commitments:

- **Stewardship**—We respect each other and care for all resources entrusted to us.
- **Ownership**—We take responsibility for producing quality work through individual and collaborative efforts.
- **Action**—We take pride in our work and adapt leadership, expertise, and working styles to promote continual learning, performance improvement, and ongoing success.
- **Reflection**—We encourage each person to reflect, develop, grow, and share equal responsibility for quality performance.
- **Interaction**—We invest in open and respectful interactions to sustain our collaborative style of working and decision making.
- **Networking**—We respond to and support each other to meet challenges, to collaborate in improving our services, and to create a positive learning and working environment.
- **Growth**—We promote holistic development that is made richer by those who learn and work together.

While the length of time spent determining the appropriate name for the initiative often seemed like an exercise in meaningless semantics, the end product was one that resonated with everyone and served as a foundation for our ongoing efforts to continuously improve the service we provide to all members of our learning community. Perhaps most significant was the level of consensus around the kind of community we needed to be to support our mission.

The statement of philosophy of service and core commitments was presented to the entire community at one of our regularly scheduled campus-wide institutes. The next step was to have each department choose one of the core commitments and develop an action plan with specific measurable goals to improve service that connected directly to the selected commitment. The hope was that each department would select a core commitment that resonated with their specific departmental mission and develop a plan that would be innovative, specific to the department, and measurable. The emphasis was to achieve full support from every member of the department on the commitment selected, as well as on the implementation plan.

Departmental Example

The Admissions Department used a designated planning/retreat day to discuss the seven core commitments and decide on the one they felt best fit their strategic agenda for the coming year. “Networking” was selected given the emphasis on building a cohesive team that could effectively work well with every division on campus. The department created its own survey instrument to assess the level of support they perceived they gave and received from each other within the department, as well as from other departments on campus. The purpose of this questionnaire was to reinforce the selected core commitment and determine a baseline measurement of the level of interaction the staff had with other areas of the campus, as well as the quality of the interactions. Scores were recorded so that, after 12 months, a follow-up survey would be able to demonstrate measurable progress. Based on initial survey findings, the department developed a two-prong strategy: an emphasis on building intra-department relationships and a strategy for increased communication campus wide. For the internal strategy, the staff decided to administer the Myers-Briggs inventory as a way to better understand each other as individuals and learn how their individual perceptions affect motivation, values, reactions, and work personality.

As a strategy to increase networking and collaboration with other departments on campus, the admissions staff implemented monthly “Meet ’n Greets.” These are meetings hosted by admissions and to which are invited all members of the campus community. The Admissions Department gives a brief overview of departmental goals and the responsibilities of each member. There are personal introductions and an open time for sharing and networking. To date, the participant evaluations of these sessions have been extremely positive and respondents indicate they have a better idea of how their respective departments support each other’s work. The Admissions Department summarized the following service-centered community goals for the year: heightened departmental morale as measured by an annual climate survey, improved efficiency and productivity as measured by enrollment data, and improved communication as measured by an annual self-report survey.

Lessons Learned

This experience has convinced us of the importance of a clearly articulated philosophy of a professional culture that has the support of the entire community. “Customer service” does not resonate and inspire in the same way as building a “service-centered community.” Giving each department the latitude to determine the core commitment that mattered most to their effective functioning, along with the encouragement to experiment and be creative, ensured that the goals had meaning to every department on campus. Department members understood that having fun was not only permissible but encouraged. Management learned that having the patience to wait for a campus to work through both real and perceived obstacles was ultimately the key to the plan’s success.



About the Author

Dr. Mary Meehan has been president of Alverno College since 2004. During her tenure, the college’s enrollment has grown by more than 35 percent and has been recognized as the most up and coming college in the Midwest by *US News and World Report*. Prior to coming to Milwaukee, Dr. Meehan was the executive vice president for administration at Seton Hall University. She has experience as executive vice president and chief operating officer at St. Mary’s Hospital in New Jersey and administrator and CEO of St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York.

Dr. Meehan serves on many local and national boards, including the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education Commission on Women in Higher Education, Women’s College Coalition, St. Bonaventure University, Georgian Court University, Sacred Heart School of Theology, and Milwaukee Achievers. Dr. Meehan frequently writes and speaks on topics ranging from healthcare ethics to women’s spirituality and leadership.

A Seton Hall University alumna, Dr. Meehan earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology, master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling, and doctorate in higher education administration. In addition, she holds a master’s degree in health policy and management from New York Medical College and is a fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives.

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