Can Higher Ed Jump the Curve?

by William H. Graves

Management gurus and the books that make them are an interesting lot. Their advice, in retrospect, usually seems commonsensical and seldom profound when measured against the marketing hype their publishers generate to attract corporate readers. Reading *Jumping the Curve*,¹ you might even wish you had grown up to be a business school professor who wrote a bestseller in 1994 noting the "epochal" changes under way in the commercial world and suggesting a process for "jumping the curve" to sustainable business success in the new millennium. For then, like authors Nicholas Imparato and Oren Harari of the University of San Francisco's McCaren School of Business, you would have assured yourself a steady flow of corporate clients for your lucrative consulting practice, as well as an attractive income stream for you and your publisher. But "hot" management authors often do us a service by crystallizing a few axioms for success and illustrating their efficacy both with inspiring, in-the-know exemplars and with sad, failed-to-get-it debacles. This is certainly the case with Imparato and Harari. So I'll set aside any skepticism born of too much management platitude and with sad, failed-to-get-it debacles. This is certainly the case with Imparato and Harari. So I'll set aside any skepticism born of too much paradigm shifting during the last few years and treat their work with the due diligence it deserves.

Imparato and Harari argue that civilization is in the midst of its third epochal (discontinuous) change. The first started in the Fourth Century and thrust the Classical Age into the Middle Ages; the second started in the Fourteenth Century and eventually transformed the Middle Ages into the Modern Age. We are now, they say, on our way to the Fourth Epoch, in which well-led organizations will "jump the curve" by tenaciously adhering to four organizing principles: (1) look a customer ahead; (2) build the company around the software, and build the software around the customer; (3) ensure that those who live the values and ideals of the organization are the most rewarded and the most satisfied; and (4) treat the customer as the final arbiter of service and product quality by offering an unconditional guarantee of complete satisfaction.

Should these principles apply to a college's or university's information technology (IT) service organization? I nervously believe so, while only being certain that asking the question is an interesting exercise. More generally, I believe any college or university, public or private, would do well to ask to what extent its overall institutional goals and practices should reflect Imparato's and Harari's advice. Here's why.

Both looking one customer ahead and offering an unconditional guarantee of complete satisfaction imply an institutionally shared definition of customer and attendant service. Research universities might reasonably claim several customers—students, faculty, and granting agencies, to mention just three. It is even arguable in the case of a public research university that the state is the primary customer—buying the state-wide socioeconomic benefit accruing from the university's efforts in instruction, research, and public service. In any case, some members of some research faculties are inclined to treat their disciplines or professions as the customer, bypassing any institutionally shared sense of customer. Even among those institutions of higher education which might claim the student as the customer—surely many community colleges and liberal arts colleges, as well as others—how many would be willing to offer an unconditional guarantee of complete satisfaction? Would they be guaranteeing the quality of their faculty's teaching or the quality of their students' learning—guarantees of input or of outcome?

Ensuring that those who live the values and ideals of the institution are the most rewarded and the most satisfied is very problematic in the face of such mixed signals. For example, research universities, which may arguably be viewed as having differentiated customer sets, have done little to differentiate their reward structures accordingly. Or put another way, if those who live the values and ideals of a research university are being favored in its reward structure, then the evidence in most cases suggests that its sole customer is research—the discipline or the grantor/contractor. Through these dissonant observations and questions, I am suggesting that mapping institutional goals and strategies against Imparato's and Harari's four organizing principles would be a revealing and worthwhile exercise for any college or university.

In such an exercise there is a basic perspective which, if adapted to institutional context, might position an institution to understand better how to "jump the curve." It is arguable that a

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primary goal of any educational institution is to create learning opportunities for its customers. From this goal arise a number of points of institutional differentiation. The choice of customer focus differentiates the nature and scope of an institution’s learning opportunities. Viewing faculty members as customers, for example, recognizes that scholarship and research represent learning at its deepest levels. From this vantage point, some colleges and universities are creating subsidized learning opportunities for their faculties. That is, faculty experts are subsidized (paid) to advance the boundaries of knowledge and to provide related apprentice learning opportunities for students—majors and graduate students.

A second point of differentiation is the degree of subsidy offered to different customers. Faculty subsidies (salaries) differ across institutional types, with smaller subsidies—in community colleges, for example—driving lesser expectations for individualized learning (research) opportunities and outcomes. In an inverse manner, student subsidies also differ, with smaller subsidies—in private institutions, for example—driving greater expectations for individualized student learning opportunities. And there are other points of institutional differentiation arising from the goal of creating learning opportunities for “customers,” however defined.

Which areas of the knowledge base are to be included and at what depth? What will be the nature in time and place of these learning opportunities—on campus in a classroom, in the workplace via real-time interactive video, at home via the Internet and its asynchronous communications technologies, in well-equipped laboratories, in a research library? Will opportunities to certify “chunks” of learning (courses) be available and, if so, how? Will opportunities for institutional endorsement of overall learning be available in the form of degrees or certificates?

But I did not set out to contest traditional ideas about the nature and goals of higher education. So I’ll leave it to readers in the context of their institutions to decide whether there is merit in pushing further to map my proposed learning perspective, which can include the faculty as a customer, against the four organizing principles of Imparato and Harari. Meanwhile, I’ll get to where I thought I would be by now: relating their four principles to the work of IT service organizations in colleges and universities.

The four principles would have been as useful fifteen years ago as today. By failing to look one customer ahead, central IT support organizations remained too wedded to the mainframe and minicomputer in the early days of the personal computer. In a recent article, Polley McClure essentially argues that central IT support organizations in higher education may be at a similar blind spot today as they wrestle to balance a mix of central and distributed IT support services. The evidence for this includes the growing dissatisfaction with the central IT support organization being reported by campus after campus. There appears to be no easy way to look one customer ahead today, but IT professionals must do their best to understand the direction of the Internet and the Web and the institutional implications of their continuing phenomenal growth.

Today’s rapid changes in technology and escalating demands for IT services in higher education make it difficult to contemplate offering an unconditional guarantee of complete satisfaction. Doing so would require a very careful delineation of IT services and the customers they support. But this is the point, and a good point. It would be necessary, for example, to understand whether a particular service is targeted at individuals or at a department or departments. E-mail is an example of the former and a facilities management package of the latter. Such distinctions were easier to make a few years ago than today. For example, is the customer for a student services package the office of student affairs or the entire campus community? The answer should be the latter if the institution is committed to “building the company around the software, and building the software around the customer.”

Unconditional service guarantees also would require a change in attitude on the part of some IT professionals. For example, some of the most brilliant technical specialists are among the least service-oriented professionals. They frequently do not live the values and ideals of their organizations, yet they often are rewarded handsomely for their technical prowess. Imparato’s and Harari’s challenge in this area is an important one to any IT support organization hoping to treat the customer as the final arbiter of service quality.

All in all, the four principles for “jumping the curve” heightened my determination to understand and improve the experiences of those using the central IT services I oversee at my university. I am more determined than ever to link these services to institutional objectives. I am also determined to define available services more sharply and, equally important, to clarify what services are not available. Perhaps most intriguing of all, I now find myself engaged by the notion of service guarantees. Reflecting on the four principles could be dangerous to your modus operandi, too.