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# REACHING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM...

# RETENTION OF THE MBA STUDENT

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**S**elling the Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program has provided fertile entrepreneurial ground for the School of Business Administration (SBA) at Kennesaw State College. Since 1986, the SBA has utilized a number of promotional strategies to sell its degree programs including print media ads, radio spots, direct mail promotions, direct personal selling to the local area business and residential communities, and word of mouth. The strategies were designed to recruit working adults interested in pursuing graduate business education on an evening and/or weekend basis. As a result of these strategies and growth in both population and new businesses in and around Cobb County, MBA admissions have grown rapidly. The school progressed from "ground zero" to its position as the second largest MBA program in the State of Georgia (second only to Georgia State University) in little more than four years.

The sale was made! Over 800 students have been admitted to the graduate business program. Making the sale however, is only the first step in marketing the MBA. Yes, Kennesaw State's School of Business currently has an estimated 800 registered MBA students, but less than 400 students take classes on a regular basis. Research conducted on those students who do not return suggests that:

- non-returnees are *not* transferring



to other graduate programs;

- students are dropping out because of the *multiple demands* for their time and the *lack of any support network* to help them through the demanding process of graduate school.

While emphasis must continue to be placed on making additional *sales* (recruitment and admissions), emphasis must also be placed on student retention. In this age of declining enrollment, academic institutions cannot

afford the affliction of what Theodore Levitt refers to as "Marketing Myopia"—possessing a strategically narrow marketing focus.

Where does our job as educators end in the process of customer satisfaction? Is it upon student enrollment into the program? Completion of an individual course? Graduation with the degree in hand? Or is it a continuing process that supports the student from recruitment, to enrollment, to effective learning and graduation, and on to

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# MBA MBA MBA MBA

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involvement as well-educated alumnus and a thinking contributor to the business community?

It is important for organizations to "practice what they preach." We, as business educators, teach students the importance of the marketing concept. This principle suggests that effective performance will only be realized if there is an organization-wide focus on customer need satisfaction. The application of this concept resulted in the development of the *product manager* concept within the school. Each area of concentration is coordinated by a product manager whose function is to serve as a point of contact between the customers (students) and the organization (KSC-SBA). These product managers contact each incoming student and provide counseling and guidance on an ongoing basis. The program has been effective. Retention of students has improved and student feedback has been very positive. This program provides an individualized, one on one, micro approach to customer service.

Continuing to apply the marketing concept has resulted in the second phase of this move toward a complete customer service/satisfaction focus—the development of the *MBA Survival Support System*. More global and macro oriented in approach than the product manager concept, the development of an integrative support system recognizes that returning to graduate school is an event filled with mixed emotions—excitement combined with a great deal of apprehension and confusion. Students, especially non-traditional adult learners, often come into the program feeling lost, overwhelmed, and many times alone, but usually highly motivated.

Objectives of the Survival Support System include:

- enhancing *academic performance* throughout the graduate program through skills development orientations;
- enhancing *success in coping* with the complexities of school, employment, and home by providing a "safety net" to the student, and outreach to their families;
- improving *student retention* and program completion by involving

the students from the beginning with the faculty, product managers, alumni, MBA administrators, and staff support services, including career counseling and placement, library, computer assistance, CETL, etc.;

- setting up a network for communication between alumni, students, administration, faculty, and staff so new students can become acquainted with the college, i.e. course requirements, etc.;
- keeping alumni involved in an ongoing way with the college and the School of Business.

Implementation of this system will not only help new students "get out of the gate" quicker, but will yield many other benefits as well. As faculty, we can expect a higher level of performance as a result of their early exposure to general information gathering, presentation, and methodology skills. As students, the new enrollees come into the program more confident, with higher achievement expectations, and with a support network. The college stands to gain a more loyal and productive student body that feels that the SBA cares about how well they do. Involved alumni who will move into higher level jobs as a result of their degrees, can become the college's greatest contributors in terms of program awareness, recruitment, funding and enhanced contact with the business community. As a college, we stand to gain greater intra-organizational synergy as both students and faculty gain a better idea of the resource base from which we work—a resource base that extends well beyond the boundaries of Kennesaw State College.

With initial funding received from a Teaching Adult Learners Grant, the KSC School of Business, with the support of the MBA Alumni and the Student Activities Committees, conducted the first phase in the development of the continuing Survival Support System for MBA's at Kennesaw State College during Fall Quarter of 1989. Over sixty KSC students, spouses, and alumni attended the half-day *MBA Survival Skills Orientation Workshop*. Students were introduced to the key players in the School of Business

(dean, faculty, product managers, administrators, and support staff), and to campus resources (library, media, computer, placement, student activities, Small Business Development Center, Family Business Forum).

Students learned how to conduct a professional presentation, research company and industry information, and determine validity and reliability. They also began to develop a network of associates (fellow students, alumni) who provided them with perspective regarding the program, the professors, and career tracks, and were exposed to information and techniques to ensure that their relationships survive the added pressure graduate school brings.

At the conclusion of the formal program a survey was conducted of all participants to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshop and to gain a better understanding of student/customer needs and wants as they relate to completion of their KSC graduate program. This was followed by a picnic and informal feedback session.

Insights gained from these activities included the desire on the part of the students for:

- additional skills based workshops;
- opportunities for social interaction with other students and spouses throughout the process;
- continued support of this type throughout their graduate school experience.

An added benefit of this program was the feeling on the part of the participants that KSC cares.

Completing one Survival Skills Orientation is but the first phase in the development of a continuing Survival Support System for our students. The challenge now is to see that the focus on customer service is fully institutionalized and implemented throughout the infrastructure of the college and that priorities are revised and resources appropriated to implement fully the Survival Support System as an *on-going process*.

Simply getting the student enrolled isn't enough. Keeping them requires customer support and satisfaction throughout the process—not just at the beginning (admittance) and the end (graduation). ♣

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