Executive Summary

“Getting our Money’s Worth: Consumerist Attitudes among Indiana University Students”
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Indiana University Bloomington
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One of the contentious issues surrounding debates in higher education is whether and to what degree students see college as a purchasing arrangement like any other. In recent years, there has been a good deal of discussion among academics about the presumably rising “consumerist attitude” toward higher education among college students. Instructors complain that students are not academically engaged and that they are instead concerned with “getting their money’s worth,” at times making demands that instructors believe interfere with learning. Although these discussions are common in university hallways and academic newsletters, no research has been done to identify what attitudes make up a consumerist perspective, nor do we know its prevalence.

We add to existing scholarship on this topic by approaching the issue of consumerism with an openness to what “consumerism” means. Our primary research question is: How might we define and measure “consumerism” in higher education? More specifically, is “consumerism” 1) equated with a customer/seller relationship between students and the university? or 2) does it also include attitudes regarding specific issues related to the college experience?

The survey instrument used in this study includes a wide variety of items, allowing for the possibility that specific issues faced in higher education settings may be part of a consumerist attitude toward higher education, in addition to items that explicitly invoke a parallel between the student/university relationship and the customer/seller relationship. We do this with a large, randomly-selected campus-wide sample of undergraduates. With this instrument and sample, we are able to create a consumerism scale that can be implemented in other educational settings.

We answer two additional questions about the sample used to derive the consumerism scale: What is the prevalence of consumerism among undergraduates? and Are there characteristics that separate undergraduates who do and do not embrace this perspective?

The data were collected during the Spring and Summer of 2004 through an 81-item online survey of randomly-selected undergraduates at Indiana University-Bloomington, a large Midwestern research university. 553 students participated in the survey; analyses requiring complete data include 529 cases

Factor analysis was used to test for the existence of a consumerism scale; scale scores were created by adding responses to each of the items in the scale. Ordinary least squares regression was used to determine the correlates of the consumerist attitude. The model used for these analyses includes all demographic information: gender, residency, class standing, GPA, major, and percentage of college expenses paid by the student. It also includes four attitudinal items, a series of critical thinking items, and one item that asked for agreement with the following statement, “My tuition dollars entitle me to certain benefits.” Qualitative analysis confirms our conclusions and provides texture to the data.

Identification of the Consumerism scale. Our maximum likelihood factor analysis confirms the existence of a consumerism scale, distinct from others present in the survey. Despite indications that the consumerist attitude may reach beyond the “crass” equation of the student/university relationship with that of a customer/seller, we find that this straightforward
“consumerist” attitude is distinct from the other attitudes we tap in our survey instrument. The consumerism scale is comprised of the following five items:

- “I think of my education as a product I am buying.”
- “My relationship with the university is similar to the relationship between a customer and seller.”
- “I believe most students think of their education as a product they are buying.”
- “Students should get tuition and fee reimbursement for classes they think they didn’t learn anything from.”
- “I believe students should think of their education as a product they are buying.”

Prevalence of Consumerism. As can be seen in Figure 1, the consumerist attitude is fairly evenly distributed in the sample population. There are a few students who completely reject this idea, and a few who accept it completely. However, most students fall in the middle of the range (\( \bar{x} = 27.57 \), range 5-50). This means that, contrary to concern expressed by faculty and instructors, the majority of students are not overwhelmingly consumerist.

Figure 1. Frequency of Consumerism

Characteristics of consumerist students. We used ordinary least squares regression to examine the characteristics that may distinguish between those who are and who are not consumerist. These results indicate that few demographic characteristics have a significant effect on consumerism. Those with a higher GPA are less likely to be consumerist (-2.05, \( p < .01 \)); those who pay a higher percentage of their college expenses themselves are more likely to be consumerist (.037, \( p < .05 \)). Surprisingly, there are no significant differences according to gender, indicating that neither men nor women are significantly more likely than the other to be consumerist. There are also no significant differences according to major – business students are not significantly more likely than arts and sciences students to be consumerist. Finally, neither state residency nor class standing produces a significant effect.

Qualitative responses. The 553 students who responded to the survey provided a total of 1541 responses to the open-ended item, “What three things does your tuition most entitle you to while at Indiana University?” By far, the most common response to the open-ended item had to do with “education.” Quality instruction follows education in terms of frequency, with facilities, technology, and preparation for the workforce also commonly referenced. Returning to the assumption made by faculty that the consumerist perspective is driving students, we might expect that students would take this opportunity to ask for entitlements that reflect an attitude
that education is a product students purchase. However, less than 1% of the open-ended responses could be identified as exhibiting the consumerist perspective.

In conclusion, this study responds to discussions of student consumerism that have relied solely on anecdote by providing 1) a scale that can be used to collect data on student consumerism and 2) an examination of the prevalence and correlates of consumerism at a large research university. We identify a “crass” consumerism scale, and find that this attitude is fairly normally distributed amongst undergraduates, with most students falling in the middle of the distribution. Although causality should be explored further, we find that those with a lower GPA are more likely to take this approach, as are those who pay a greater percentage of their own college expenses. Data not presented in this summary tell us that issues of entitlements are on students’ minds, but that few take the consumerist approach about which most critics have been concerned. These results can provide the basis for a rich discussion among instructors and scholars of teaching and learning regarding how to better advance student learning with an awareness of the students’ perspectives on the rights and responsibilities of the parties involved.

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