

A Culture of Customer Service

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) has always enjoyed a stellar reputation as an intimate, affordable, top-ranked HBCU. As one of the South's leading liberal arts institutions with a highly competitive and respected law school, a student/faculty



NCCU employees participate in a QSI training session.

ratio of 14:1 and more than 135 degree concentrations, it's easy to see why enrollment has grown by leaps and bounds during the past 10 years. However, for all the reasons NCCU is beloved and esteemed by students, faculty and staff, there was one area in which that sense of pride was not felt — customer service. Despite its myriad successes, the institution had been troubled for several years by negative feedback from students, alumni and university employees regarding internal customer and support services.

In fact, in a 2000 survey of NCCU students, faculty, administrators and staff relating to student success and retention, “service excellence,” “concern for the individual” and “campus climate” were consistently rated low. Survey respondents indicated that they felt that poor internal customer service negatively impacted student recruitment, retention and success rates. This customer service disconnect so concerned NCCU Chancellor Charlie Nelms that, in the fall of 2007, he established the Quality Service Initiative (QSI) in the human resources training department. As part of this

initiative, he also included “improved customer service and internal communications” as one of the priorities in the institution's 10-year strategic plan.

Quality Service Initiative

The QSI is a dedicated individual and team effort toward achieving a culture of service at NCCU that will assure the university's continued success in recruiting, retaining and graduating its primary customers — its students. The QSI aims to create a respectful, responsive and encouraging environment for students, faculty and staff and provides an organizational focus on quality, customer satisfaction, teamwork and leadership. The QSI team, which consists of two HR consultants and a director, delivers customer service training to all departments across campus. In addition to general, across-the-board training (sessions include Building a Culture of Excellent Customer Service, Teambuilding, Serving the Difficult Customer and more), the QSI team also focuses on concerns and issues that are unique to each department or function.

The QSI team utilizes several tools and resources to enhance customer service on campus, including suggestion boxes and online forms to solicit feedback from constituents; mystery shoppers and mystery callers; a QSI website; web-based customer service training; a freshman class survey on their experience with customer service on campus (conducted after completion of one semester); QSI presentations for faculty and staff institutes, freshman orientation, and student organizations; a tie-in to performance management (every NCCU employee is held accountable for customer service and it is addressed as a key objective for each employee's annual review); and individual action plans to help improve processes and enhance the delivery of services.

The QSI has several guiding principles. Among them: all NCCU employees are expected to greet the customer promptly and courteously; give their undivided attention to the customer; ask questions to determine the customer's needs; listen carefully and empathize with the customer's concerns; provide knowledgeable, relevant and accurate information; summarize to check for understanding; act or agree on a clear course of action; try to exceed expectations; ask questions to check for satisfaction; follow through; apologize when appropriate; and thank the customer and offer further assistance.

Positive Results

The QSI aligns directly with NCCU's strategic plan, which is a blueprint for the university to continue to be successful and remain competitive. The initiative is also instrumental in helping to achieve the goal of increasing student retention and graduation rates. As the QSI team continues to conduct training and promote excellent customer service across the campus, feedback from students, faculty, staff and other constituents indicates that positive changes are being seen in attitude and customer service.

Indeed, a culture change has begun to emerge across the NCCU campus. A follow-up to the 2000 survey was conducted in 2009, with results indicating that constituents' experiences with customer service on campus have vastly improved. Another survey will be conducted in September of this year to again gauge improvement and identify areas in which work still needs to be done.

"NCCU's QSI initiative exemplifies training/organization development practice as a strategic component of human

For its Quality Service Initiative, North Carolina Central University's human resources department received CUPA-HR's 2012 Excellence in Human Resource Practices Award. Thanks to the generous support of VALIC, NCCU received a \$2,000 contribution to an endowment or scholarship fund of the HR team's choice.



resources," says Norma Petway, director of training/organization development and QSI at NCCU. "Offering effective and efficient training, like we've done with the QSI, is a tool for improving productivity and assisting the university with its strategic plan. Customer service is a behavior that has a direct effect on goals and objectives, and it will most certainly affect the bottom line."

"As a triple alum of NCCU, I am proud of the positive changes brought about by the Quality Service Initiative," says NCCU law student Tomasi Larry. "I had the esteemed honor to serve as student body president in 2007-08 and chief executive counselor of the Graduate Student Association in 2009-10. My experiences in these leadership capacities helped me to understand firsthand the great challenge that my beloved school faced regarding quality customer service. However, with the implementation of the QSI, I began almost immediately to notice improvements in customer service. Members of the NCCU community are now eager to serve, and I'm witnessing a new culture in which excellent customer service is the standard and all members of the campus community are treated with dignity, pride and respect."

Adds Jeremy Faulk, assistant director for conference and guest services in NCCU's department of residential life: "In my position, I have a strong commitment to provide quality customer service at all times. I am always eager to find ways to increase our knowledge of innovative ways to keep our customers happy, and the QSI training did just that. In fact, the QSI challenges each and every member of the Eagle community to strive for quality service to enhance the legacy of NCCU." 



To learn more about NCCU's Quality Service Initiative, visit the QSI website at <http://web.nccu.edu/administration/QSI/index.php>.



NCCU employees participate in a teambuilding exercise as part of QSI training.