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The Customer is Always Right, Right? Freshman Commissioning Service



by Erik Hoekstra

This is the day that the Lord has made. How good it is for us to rejoice and be glad on this momentous day! This is a day that, I trust, all of us gathered here this morning have prayed over, planned for, and anticipated eagerly for many, many years. One of our incoming freshman, Jamie Shoots, posted a one-word tweet last evening as she set her alarm for 4:15 a.m., which really summed it up best: “WOOOOHOOOO!” Jamie, I am so with you—as president, this is one of the best days of the year! And yes, this is a celebration to praise God, for we are here today to celebrate and thank God for bringing us to this time and place together.

So friends, on behalf of the entire Dordt College community, it is my joy and privilege to welcome you and to commission these new students in ser-

vice at Dordt College as members of the 60th such group since the college’s founding. In order to welcome you, new students, and give you and your parents a sense of this place, I want to share with you a quick story from my past. Bear with me: there are some important learning points in this story.

I can still remember my first year at Dordt College as a faculty member. It was 1997—the year some of you in Dordt’s class of 2018 may have been born, or maybe that’s off by a year or two, but it’s likely that for most of you, the hardest course you were preparing for was “Toilet Training 101” rather than courses that you are looking towards this year, such as “Biblical Foundations” or “Introduction to Engineering” or “Human Anatomy” or “Roots of Western Worldview.” I was teaching marketing courses here at the time and had come from the business field, where I had found an article about “Edu-tainment”: the concept that class time in college teaching should be entertaining as well as educational for students. I suggested to a senior faculty member who was my mentor that it would be a great article for a broader faculty discussion, and later in the semester we did hold a forum for which we had all read the article and were set to talk about it in a larger group.

My mentor at the time was Dr. James Schaap, an English professor, a Dordt College graduate, and a giant in Reformed circles for his commitment to a biblical approach to living “all of life” before the face of God—of taking every moment of time and every aspect of reality captive to Christ. I believe he truly knew that my suggestion of this article might

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cause a stir in the faculty—which is why, I believe, he encouraged me to start such a faculty conversation. I was “fresh meat,” you see, and I think Dr. Schaap thought it was going to be fun to watch the fireworks. The meeting didn’t disappoint. And, I might add, Dr. Schaap’s classes were always entertaining while also certainly being educational. As we talked through the article as a group of faculty, I can still remember where I was sitting when a different senior professor said something that I’ll never forget. In a rather dismissive tone he groused, “All of this talk about entertainment in the classroom just

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makes me feel that we are talking about students primarily as ‘customers’ who have bought a ticket to a four-year journey aboard a cruise ship, and classes are the equivalent of the floor show.”

As a young, impetuous, business professor, I just couldn’t help myself, and I blurted out, “You’re finally starting to get it.” As you can imagine, I was never asked again to provide a possible article for a faculty discussion. Then, as now, that professor’s disdain for the concept and my rather immature exclamation caused nervous laughter and consternation in the room. I hope that I’ve grown a bit wiser since those days, as well.

But, fast forward with me to this spring. I read a research study by Zachary Finney & Treena Gillespie, from the University of South Alabama, in which 52% of over 1000 college students in the study identified their main relationship with their university as “customers.” In a similar editorial recently, titled “Customer Mentality,” a faculty mem-

ber at a large public university bemoaned that his alma mater had just installed a climbing wall and resort style swimming pool in their effort to attract students. He stated,

We are undeniably in an era where the governing model of education is one that conceives of students as customers. In fact, this cognitive model of how colleges and students relate to one another, that of a business selling to customer, is currently so deeply rooted in how we see and discuss higher education that it can be difficult to even imagine other frames or metaphors for the relationship between educators and those who access that education.

The author did have some positives to mention about using the metaphor of education as a business. He writes,

If there’s an upside to thinking of students as customers, I think it is that the model reminds us that we and our universities are directly accountable to students. Ours is a role of service, direct service to the students we enroll, and indirect service to the society those students will populate and some day run. We are accountable to manage university resources — human, financial, and other — around the primary mission of providing education.

But ultimately, his thesis, which I largely agree with, is that the college as a corporation goes too far. The zenith of his article was this sentence:

We know that within the cliché-driven logic of our culture that if students are customers, then the old main street American, folksy business mantra that “the customer is always right” can’t be too far behind.

When I read that quote, I was reminded of my young and somewhat foolish days as a new professor and that conference room session years ago on this campus. But, I was also reminded of some wisdom I learned in my first formal work experience more than 30 years ago. I will be forever grateful to a mentor of mine, a gentleman now in his 90s whom I first worked for in my teens. I washed cars at his auto body shop after school and on Saturdays, and, being partially retired and having mostly turned the main operation over to his son, he’d often work beside me, preparing the cars—for final delivery to the customer after having their dents pulled out

and having been repainted. Early on in my work he taught me a more appropriate thought regarding that statement about customers: One day, he asked me, “Son, have you ever heard the statement, ‘The customer is always right?’” and I told him that I was familiar with that mantra. He said, “That’s total rubbish. Many times our customers are misguided, uninformed, manipulating ignoramuses.” He went on, “Sometimes, the customer is flat-out wrong, but remember,” he said with a smile, “The customer may not always be right, but the customer is always the customer.”

His point was that when it came to the intricacies of auto rebuilding, most car owners know very little about how it all actually happens, and they might often be off base. But they always deserve to be treated with respect and dignity and afforded every courtesy if we expect to have the privilege and opportunity to serve them. “The customer may not always be right, but the customer is always the customer”: Wise words that have served me well in many settings—both in business and more broadly in life.

But, the larger point is that the metaphors we use for things matter. The words we use influence how we act. That is why I want to be clear this morning that this college—although we focus on running well—is different from a business. And while I concur that our work at Dordt College should center on students, you are not customers—God made you for so much more than that. Rather, we see you as image bearers of God and servants of His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. You are God’s workmanship—or another translation says “masterpiece.” That sounds much more like the students I see here today—created in Jesus Christ to do great works, which God prepared in advance for you to do.

That’s much more than a customer choosing a product—that’s the Providential God of the Universe, who has been shaping you and heading you towards this day, when you sit in that seat, and he’s got great work for you to do. And, we are eager to be here to help. That’s why this institution exists and why we aim to run it wisely as stewards, watching over the human talents and material assets that God has given us. However, our primary focus is not the financial bottom line but rather the eternal purpose of building up servants for effective service

in God’s Kingdom.

While we do welcome you here today as students, my role is more than the Walmart greeter at the door, saying “Welcome.” We’re actually commissioning you, new students, into Kingdom service here. A commissioning is different from a welcome. Perhaps some of you have participated in commissioning ceremonies at your church when you’ve sent forth mission teams or hired a new pastor fresh from seminary. Or maybe some of you have a friend or relative serving in the military, and they’ve had a commissioning ceremony as part of their induction into service.

Today, we are enlisting you as office bearers in the educational community here. We want you to know specifically that we take up the task with you as mutual office bearers—all of us together as a part of this Christian educational community, called by the Creator God of the Universe; redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and nurtured through the Holy Spirit, whose presence we acknowledge as integral to the proper functioning of this campus on a daily basis. You see, you are far more than a customer of this place. And while we will serve you with a focused passion that you might see in the very best business environments, your enrollment at Dordt College is far different from taking a cruise or choosing to buy a new car or boat with the brand “Dordt College” affixed.

We should not be surprised that we have a different lens from that of the broader culture or state universities. The apostle Paul admonished us to conform no longer to the patterns of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And, while we may offer some of the same programs of study that other universities do—and, just to be clear, our program outcomes are, most often, superior to those programs on many objective measures—the reason we do what we do here at Dordt College isn’t focused on conforming to the way of the world.

Parents and other loved ones of these new students at Dordt College: I want you to know that we take this hand-off of these your sons and daughters seriously—as a sacred trust—a covenantal responsibility. We know that you, as Christian parents, have promised God to raise them up in the fear and knowledge of God, and you have already dedicated them for service in God’s Kingdom. And

we now join you—we now come alongside to take that development beyond your household and into the broader world. We are honored that you have helped your son or daughter respond positively to God’s call to come to Dordt College, and we will do everything we can, God helping us, to do so obediently and faithfully for God’s glory.

We humbly accept your invitation, parents, to work with your sons and daughters in this next phase of their mission as Christ’s children. Because students, in the middle of that word “commission” is “mission,” the sense of going on a journey or taking up a cause. You are starting a journey, or at least taking a significant step in a new leg of that journey. You are enlisting in a cause. You are starting a task. You’ve been called to this work.

You’ve been called to this job, this cause, this mission, by God—the creator God of Scripture. That’s the kind of a community Dordt College claims to be, a community that affirms the authority of God’s word in the Bible and the centrality of this truth—that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and those who dwell therein.” The education you receive here—both in the Core Program and in your major field of study, both in the dorms and on the athletic fields, and both on the theatrical stage and in the musical ensemble, all of your activities here—will affirm that central truth time and time again: “The Earth in the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and those who dwell therein....”

I want you, freshman, and your parents to know that this school has invested much time and energy to bring together a faculty and staff who are deeply interested and expertly equipped to live and learn together with you during your time at Dordt College—to help shape, mold, and fashion you into effective servants for Christ’s purposes in the world.

And, we have also invested in facilities—and I’d encourage you all to tour the just-completed first phase of our science expansion as evidence of that—but you’ll find no climbing wall here. And while we do have a pool across the street, it is shared in a stewardly way—along along with our athletic fields and several other of our facilities, in partnership with the local community school and citizens of this community—to keep Dordt College as affordable as possible.

We have also taken seriously the important notion—as a residential learning and living community—that what you learn in college is not entirely through your courses or reported in your grades. As novelist Walker Percy once said, “It is possible to get all A’s in class and still flunk life.” We are committed as a campus community to full partnership between the curricular and co-curricular aspects of your education as mutually supportive and inter-dependent efforts in the shaping process. Your residence life staff, your internship supervisors, the athletic coaches, your work-study supervisors, the off-campus studies office, and the career-development team are just as committed to developing your God-given talents as are all the faculty. We aim to open up every area of life with you in light of God’s revelation—to help you ask the right questions and then have the worldview, gleaned from Scripture and born out of God’s creational structure, to begin to find obedient answers to those questions.

We will push you—as students desiring to faithfully carry out your God-ordained office—to wrestle with big questions. You will talk with faculty and other students, and you will listen to one another to gain wisdom and insight and a sense of camaraderie as you walk this road together. Over the past 60 years, we’ve assembled this community to engage and challenge you to ask and answer those tough questions, to journey with you on your mission, to be your trusted mentors as you bump up against the limits of your own understanding, and to be grace-filled partners with you in the process—supporting and encouraging you so that you won’t stumble and fall as you step out into new challenges and adventures.

So, remember: the words and metaphors we use matter. Remember: you are God’s workmanship, his masterpieces, “created in Jesus Christ to do good works, which he ordained for you” before the beginning of time. And remember: today is far more than just a welcoming of new customers to Dordt College. Today is a day to thank God for His great gift to us in Jesus Christ—and to commission you, new office-bearers, as enlisted in the mission of Jesus Christ. And we will do all we can, God helping us, to equip you for effective work in His already started but not yet completed Eternal Kingdom.