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Service on the community college campus: The Millennial generation perspective

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Service on the community college campus:
The millennial generation perspective
by
Kristie Fisher

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Iowa State University
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how Millennial generation students (born 1982 or after) experience the services they receive in the community college setting at Kirkwood Community College, a comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa. The overarching research question for the study is: How do Millennial generation students describe their experiences with service staff on the Kirkwood campus? Among the secondary research questions include: How widely do Millennial generation students describe themselves as “customers” of the community college? How can the characteristics of the Millennial generation help community colleges understand the relationship between the Millennial students and the community college service staff?

With over 90 million Millennials living in the U.S. (Howe and Strauss, 2007), community colleges are experiencing the first wave of the Millennial students arriving on campuses. In order to thrive, community colleges need to more effectively serve the needs of this generation as community colleges compete for students with four-year institutions and proprietary colleges. The quality of instruction will not be the only deciding factor for attracting students; early indications note Millennial students and their parents will also expect quality service in the whole college experience.

In this study, Millennial generation students consistently described their experiences with service staff at Kirkwood Community College in a positive light. Overall, they were very satisfied with how they were treated and with the service they received. The participants seemed to agree that the constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2001) is positive and a good service experience. Even when less than positive
experiences were discussed, the participants usually shared that these services were justified or easily explained.

The majority of the Millennial participants in this study believed the term “customer” described their out-of-the-classroom experiences but not the full community college experience. Consequently, the use of the term customer on the community college campus was not widely used; when used it was usually qualified by the participants to exclude classroom experiences.

The results of this study can be used to inform professional development opportunities for service staff at community colleges, as well as at other institutions of higher education. Professional development activities should acknowledge the importance of student expectations related to the service experience. Equally important, community college staff professional development programs should consider drawing the distinction between classroom experiences and those interactions with community college personnel that happen outside the classroom.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Is a student a customer in the community college setting? This question is sparking conversations as students, faculty, and college staff strive to understand the varied roles of students and the varied responsibilities of the community colleges they attend.

While a community college is very different from a retail store, the customer service experience still rings true for many community college students, and the vulnerability factor is even more pronounced. How does the long line and inability to figure out which books to buy in the bookstore impact our students’ relationships with the school? When a confused and desperate student arrives at the financial aid office overwhelmed with the Free Application for Student Financial Aid, does the quality of service impact the student’s decision to attend college or, more importantly, his/her confidence level about succeeding in college? Does the pleasant – or not so pleasant – experience with a department secretary change how the student feels about the community college?

How do students’ ages and generational backgrounds determine how they gauge the importance of the quality of the service provided by the staff in higher education and, in particular, in the community college setting? Are today’s students different than yesterday; if so, does the difference impact their expectations for service? Do students consider themselves our customers?

While community colleges serve students from many generations, the focus of this study will be the Millennial generation. The literature suggests that the Millennial
students (people born in 1982 or later), and their helicopter parents, bring many new challenges to our campuses as we attempt to provide service in addition to a high quality educational experience (Howe and Strauss, 2007).

**Problem**

There are several problems addressed in this study. First, is the need to understand if Millennial students describe themselves as customers and how this perception influences their experiences. Second, there is a general lack of knowledge and research in the area of customer service in higher education. The problem is compounded by the lack of willingness to discuss or explore the topic (Scott, 1999).

Third, community colleges have traditionally operated with minimal staff to serve large numbers of students. This can lead to long lines and delays for services. This issue is magnified by the sheer number of young people in the Millennial generation and the 24/7 expectations characteristic of this generation (Taylor 2006).

Only a few years ago, researchers noted the problem of lack of research and articles concerning the Millennial generation. According to Sandfort and Haworth (2002), “College and university faculty and administrators, in particular, need to have a clearer sense of this generation if they are to provide meaningful and appropriate educational experiences and services for this new wave of college students” (p. 1). Sandfort and Haworth note the magnitude of the Millennial generation, “as well as the changing context of American higher education in which they are coming of age, their presence cannot be ignored” (p. 1). The recent entry of Millennial students onto college campuses drives a need to understand these new students and their generational differences that may impact the community college service model.
Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how Millennial generation students experience the services they receive in the community college setting at Kirkwood Community College, a comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa.

Research Questions

The over-arching research question for this study is: How do Millennial generation students describe their experiences with service staff on a campus at Kirkwood Community College, a comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa? Secondary research questions for the topic include:

- How widely do Millennial generation students describe themselves as customers of the community college?
- How can the characteristics of the Millennial generation help community colleges understand the relationship between the Millennial students and the community college service staff?
- How can community colleges use this research to develop professional development activities for service staff in the community college setting?
Significance

The topic of this study is significant for a number of reasons. First, community colleges are experiencing the first wave of the Millennial students arriving on campuses so the need to provide services to this generation is still strong. Howe and Strauss (2007) noted, “The best-known single fact about the Millennial Generation is that it is large. Already America has well over 90 million Millennials” (p. 35). Only time will tell how many of this large generation will end up on community college campuses. However, “there is no denying that Millennial students have the numbers to dominate both the educational scene and economic reality for the preceding generations” (Debard, 2004, p. 43).

In order to thrive, community colleges need to more effectively serve the needs of this generation of college students as community colleges compete for students with four-year institutions and proprietary colleges. The quality of instruction will not be the only deciding factor for attracting students; early indications note Millennial students and their parents will also expect quality service in the whole college experience. This study is important because the results can be used to inform professional development opportunities for service staff at community colleges, as well as at other institutions of higher education.

Very little research has been done on the topic of student as customer, especially as it relates to the Millennial generation and community colleges. As more and more Millennial generation students enroll in community colleges, understanding their expectations and experiences becomes more critical. This study will advance a topic that has largely been ignored and will likely encourage more conversation and study. The
challenge to higher education is to examine and research the topic of customer service, rather than dismissing it (Scott, 1999).

“Colleges and universities have a responsibility to meet students where they are, rather than wish for another kind of student. Institutions must respond to the kinds of students they are dealing with now, be aware of who they are, how they think, and how they feel” (Dehne, 1997, p.1). Customer service in education and a large Millennial generation are two important topics. The combination of the two is a topic that deserves discussion.

**Delimitations**

Due to the broad topic and the limited existing research, it was critical to focus the study. The delimitations of the study include the environment in which it was conducted. This phenomenological study involved participants who attend Kirkwood Community College. The study was further narrowed to only include Millennial students enrolled in the liberal arts program and those intending to transfer. This delimitation was critical because the experiences of liberal arts students and students with transfer plans vary substantially from students in applied science programs, which are often conducted in small cohort settings that offer additional support and service. The final delimitation was limiting the participant selection and observations to the main campus in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

**Site**

The research site is the main campus of Kirkwood Community College, a suburban, comprehensive community college in eastern Iowa. Kirkwood Community College has served a seven-county service area for over 40 years. Kirkwood operates
under the regulations of the Iowa Department of Education and is governed by a publicly-elected, nine-member board of trustees.

On July 1, 1966, Kirkwood was officially established, originally called “Area X Community College.” The college immediately assumed responsibility for the federally-funded vocational/technical programs the Cedar Rapids Community School District had provided since 1964. The college added the Arts and Sciences, Student Services and Community Education divisions a year later. In 1969, the college board of trustees decided on a new name—“Kirkwood Community College,” to honor Samuel J. Kirkwood, Iowa’s governor during the Civil War years.

To fulfill the college mission of accessibility, the college established ten sites through the region to deliver credit and non-credit classes to learners. The college enrolls over 15,000 students each fall in credit classes and enrolls nearly 40,000 non-credit students each year. While the college enrolls students at numerous campuses and centers, the majority of college credit students attend classes on the main campus in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The main campus serves a fairly traditional aged student body with an average age of 23 years and 55% full-time students. These figures compare to national averages at community colleges of an average age of 29 years and 41% full-time students (AACC Research and Statistics, 2008). Over 10,000 Millennial generation students attend the college and with, again, the majority attending classes on main campus, and over 3,000 of these students live near campus in privately-owned student housing.

Kirkwood awards Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees that transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Graduates in more than 75 Applied Science and Technology programs are prepared to enter specialized technical careers.
Kirkwood Community College is accredited by the Iowa Department of Education and by The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). Individual college programs are accredited by appropriate professional associations within their respective fields. Kirkwood is a member of the League for Innovation in the Community College, a consortium of 19 of the nation’s finest two-year colleges.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is based on Strange’s and Banning’s (2001) constructed environments theory. They noted that “constructed models of the environment focus on the subjective views and experiences of participant observers, assuming that environments are understood best through the collective perceptions of the individuals within them” (p. 86).

The theoretical framework provides the understanding that participants’ perceptions are the reality of the campus environment. “These approaches espouse a phenomenological orientation to human environments that seek what participants see in the environment as a basis for understanding and predicting their behavior” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 87).

The theoretical framework for this study predominantly focused on the administrative press which are “ones describing conditions (rules and procedures, facilities, and overall features) which exist primarily or probably because of the actions or decisions or attitudes of administrators” (Pace & Baird, 1966, p. 217). The administrative
press was critical because administrators often set the expectations for service levels on a community college campus through their policies and actions.

However, the student sources of press are also important in this study. The student press is conveyed through “extracurricular programs, informal activities, and the characteristics and attitudes of students” (Pace & Baird, 1966, p. 217). The student press is engaged when students express expectations about service levels. However, student workers and the service they provide are also relevant.

**Definitions**

The following definitions apply to this study:

- Generational definitions are provided by Straus and Howe (1991)
  - Millennial generation refers to those born in 1982 or later. While Howe and Straus have not confirmed an end date for the Millennial category, they do note that the generation birthdays will likely end sometime between 1999-2006, based on the typical length of generational cycle of 17-24 years. Kirkwood Community College enrolled over 10,000 Millennial-generation students in Fall 2007. This compares to a total student body enrollment of 15,000.
  - Baby Boomers generation refer to those born between 1943-1960.

- The *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* definition of “customer” that is used for this study is: “a person who buys goods or a service.”
• Helicopter parents refer to “today’s protective, ultra attached parents (who) make their presence and their agendas felt in every corner of college life” (Howe & Straus, 2007, p. 165).
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

A review of the existing literature will focus on the Millennial generation, student as customer in higher education, customer service, and the role higher education employees play in customer service. A larger body of literature has been published on this newest generation to enter community colleges than the areas related to customers and customer service in higher education. As the concept of customer service in higher education is not as well studied or discussed, the literature review for this topic is sparse. This chapter is organized in the following sections: The Millennial Generation, Student as Customer in Higher Education, and Customer Service and Employees in Higher Education.

The Millennial Generation

Strauss and Howe (1991) were among the first to discuss the new Millennial generation in their book, Generations: The History of America’s Future 1584-2069. They noted that the generation is unique for many reasons, including the sheer number of people who fall into the birth years. This large generation is more ethnically diverse and affluent than past generations; Millennials are also generally well educated.

The authors described a trend of extremely protective parents spurred on by a society that was evolving into a more protective mode designed to guard the nation’s precious children. This shift was even noticeable in the world of media with the failure of “kids-as-devils movies” (p. 337) such as Children of the Corn, followed by the success of “cuddly baby movies” (p. 337) such as Three Men and a Baby and She’s Having a Baby.
Parents also became more protective by shifting their children to watching G-rated movies and encouraging school uniforms.

The authors contended that in addition to a shift in parental attitudes and in the media, society was increasingly concerned about quality education for all children. The political tide was turning in the support for quality public education. Strauss and Howe’s early observations about the Millennial generation have been reaffirmed years later, though their work has not been unchallenged. Some have criticized them for making “generational generalizations” (Lowery, 2001). But Strauss responded this way:

The bottom line is this: it makes sense, like the seasons of nature. Why does spring go to summer rather than the other way around? There is a reason. There is seasonality to life and history that is in many ways a positive thing. It is something you can look at and see happening, but without looking at generations you can’t understand why it is happening. (quoted in Lowery, 2001, p.1)

Michael D. Coomes and Robert DeBard (2004) provided a conceptual framework for the interaction of generations in the higher education setting in *A Generational Approach to Understanding Students*. “This two-part interplay of one generation with another and with important social moments results in what Strauss and Howe term the ‘generational diagonal.’ The generational diagonal acknowledges that generations are not static; they move through time influencing and being influenced by important historical events” (p. 8).

An overview of the generations found on campuses today was provided by Coomes and DeBard including the “Silents (Birth Years 1925 to 1942),” “Boomers (Birth Years 1943 to 1960),” “Thirteeners (Birth Years 1961 to 1981),” and “Millennials (Birth
Years 1981 to 2002)" (pp. 9-12). Student affairs professionals can use this generational perspective to better understand and serve students but should refrain from over generalization (Coomes and Debard, 2004).

Over a decade later Howe and Strauss teamed up again to revisit the Millennial generation, this time focusing on the college years. In 2007, they published Millennials Go to College, in which they suggested that adults, including college staff, mistakenly assume Millennial students will be similar to the previous Generation X students. This mistake can reduce the ability of the community colleges to meet the Millennial students’ needs.

Seven core traits were highlighted by Howe and Strauss (2007):

- **Special:** The Millennial generation has been raised to feel critical to the family and the nation.

- **Sheltered:** From the baby on board signs to campus safety concerns, helicopter parents have sheltered Millennial children.

- **Confident:** Strong relationships and positive childhood experiences have instilled a strong sense of confidence.

- **Team-Oriented:** Team activities have dominated this generation’s formative years.

- **Conventional:** This generation has returned to many traditional values.

- **Pressured:** Unlimited opportunities have been offered to this generation, leading to pressure to achieve.

- **Achieving:** This generation is “on track to becoming the smartest, best-educated young adults in U.S. history” (p. 60)
Howe and Strauss (2007) discuss the increasing role of the parents and the parents' increasing desire to break down the cost and value of a college education to look at more than just the education.

Lowery (2004) agreed with Howe and Strauss (2007) on the importance of the need to effectively meet the expectations of Millennials and their parents in the realm of student service. Lowery (2004) suggested that technology be prioritized as a way to service Millennial needs. “Delays in response longer than the Millennials consider appropriate, however unrealistic, result in the perception that their issues or needs are not valued” (p. 95). He argued that “the use of technology, which is second nature to Millennials, holds the greatest promise for responding to their preference for efficient services” (Lowery, p. 95).

Advice for (and from) the Young at Heart: Understanding the Millennial Generation was published by Atkinson (2004) to serve as a reference for faculty teaching Millennial students. The author noted that as the first generation in over 50 years expected to meet higher educational standards than their parents, the Millennial Generation was raised with extreme pressure to do well in school. In order to meet those heightened goals, Millennials are accustomed to their parents being by their side. Overall, Generation X and late boomer parents have raised, and are raising, their Millennial students in a very protected manner (Atkinson, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2007; Straus and Howe, 1991). These parents have been involved in every aspect of their children’s lives and have assumed the role of protector whenever something does not go as planned for the Millennial student. Not only have the Millennial students led sheltered lives, they have also been raised to understand that they are “special” and as such deserve special

“The Millennials are used to questioning everything and defer to Mom and Dad when the going gets tough. As they enter the university, the academic demands become more intense and the “need” for parental intervention grows. The result is increased concern about grades by both students and parents. It is not unusual to receive calls or e-mails from parents requesting information about their child’s progress or inquiring about tests, readings and assignments.” (Atkinson, p. 3).

McGlynn (2005) presented three characteristics that many Millennials share, though she too cautioned against overgeneralizing. First, she confirmed that Millennials are a generation raised by protective parents in a protective society. Second, this generation was raised during a time of economic growth and relative comfort. Finally, she noted, “[T]hey are used to being indulged as a result of changing child-rearing practices, and they are used to being consulted in decision making by their parents” (p. 14). Brownstein discussed the creation of parental relation offices, noting that “the parental perfection complex is coming to college” (p. 4), with parents bringing the attitudes they sported at youth recreational activities to the high stakes game of college admission processes.

Sandfort and Haworth (2002) conducted a mixed methods study utilizing qualitative research approach to capture the experiences and attitudes of the Millennial generation. One participant shared, “I think there is a big movement toward service because everyone is a lot more touchy-feely” (p. 10).
Student as Customer in Higher Education

The “student as customer” phrase began to appear in research and scholarly journals a decade ago in American (and beyond) higher education inquiry. Scott (1999) explored the concept of the student as customer related to Australian tertiary students and the application of marketing philosophies to higher education. He questioned why the topic of customer service was shunned in academics. He wrote:

The question as to whether marketing really advocates the well-known adage and popular image of marketing that the “customer is always right,” for this image probably contributes significantly to academics’ reluctance to embrace a marketing perspective on the provision of higher education. (p. 194).

Scott also noted that “students are not the only customers of higher education” (p. 196). Society as a whole plays a consumer role in the higher education marketplace; in particular the government, business, and industry are customers of higher education (Scott, 1999). Just as the concept, “the customer is always right” does not truly apply in business, so does it need not always apply in higher education. Scott suggested that educators can be service providers and “deal with customers as if they are always right but not to the extent that the goals of the business fail” (p. 198). This argument allows a more comfortable relationship between the business term customer and the academic term student.

By simply understanding student expectations, Scott (1999) argued that the institution of higher education can better meet the desires of the student. Higher education might take lessons from the experiences of other professional service providers regarding quality service. When employing the services of a doctor or an attorney, lay
people do “not necessarily know if they are receiving high quality legal advice or the best possible surgery” (p. 200), but customers often determine the quality of service and their satisfaction via secondary measures such the way phone calls are handled and bedside manner. Scott encouraged academics to embrace the topic of customer service in higher education, rather than dismiss it.

Aliff (1998) suggested that though some faculty in higher education might have resisted the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement, it has much to offer institutions of higher education if given a fair chance to succeed. Some of these advantages include:

- “Improved delivery of continuing education”
- “Decreased compartmentalism and wasteful competition between disciplines achieved through an emphasis on cooperation (from TQM)”
- “Improved services to students for recruitment, orientation, registration and counseling”
- “Students…empowered by becoming participants in structuring the delivery of education. Colleges…better serv[ing] students who no longer live in dorms, work most of the day, and have children to raise.”
- “Increased student and political satisfaction.” (p. 5)

Many disadvantages of TQM in higher education were cited by Aliff (1998) as well:

- “Students are regarded as passive recipients of a commodity (rather than active learners) and, as to the assessment of the quality of learning, ‘the customer is always right.’ ”
• “Faculty will ‘pander’ to the desires of students for material that is instantly stimulating and ready to understand.”

• “The roles of the students as ‘internal customers’ and as ‘internal and external products’ will conflict. As empowered internal customers, students may affect the decline of their value as internal products passed to a higher level of study, or as external products passed to an employer” (p. 6).

While these disadvantages need to be managed, Alliff wrote, he supported a move towards incorporating TQM into college and university settings. TQM places the main focus on the needs of the customer, which lends itself to a customer service approach. TQM in its purest form is a good principle for higher education. However, Aliff suggested that administrators don’t always implement new ideas, like TQM, according to the real principles, therefore dooming them for failure.

Lomas (2007) used a qualitative study “to explore whether academic staff considers students to be customers” (p. 32). After conducting semi-structured interviews with ten lecturers, she concluded that a key theme was the impact of the introduction of tuition fees in England. Many English and Welsh students have only recently been required to pay tuition for higher education. Most of her participants agreed that the new charges had an impact on both student expectations and the lecturers’ “awareness of student needs” (p.37). Overall, Lomas’s study supported the general idea that students are perceived as customers in at least some sense of the word. However, she did cite some ambivalence about this new development in perception. One participant shared, “We want to meet the students’ needs because we are in a most competitive market place and
we want them to come to us rather than go somewhere else.” However, the participant added, “[W]e should not let students drive the higher education process because, after all, they are not buying a degree!” (Lomas, 2007, p. 39). There was agreement among participants that senior leadership was more supportive of the idea of students as customers than lower level staff.

Budd (1997) argued for the value of library staff perceiving students as customers and helping them access needed information, instead of the dated notion of building a library collection for the sake of building a collection. Budd supported the importance of providing quality customer service to library patrons; at the same time, he warned against adopting terms like customer and commodity in relation to the mission of the library. He noted, “The library’s language, and practice, should flow from as clear an idea of purpose as possible. And librarians should examine purpose independently from the pressures of capitalism and consumption” (p. 320).

A strong warning was issued by Michael Delucchi and Kathleen Korgen (2002) against viewing students as consumers. They blamed undergraduate students’ general lack of engagement on the consumerism approach that many modern students bring to higher education. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) conducted quantitative research to contribute an empirical framework to the students as customers conversation. Forty-two percent of the survey respondents agreed with the following question: “If I am paying for my college education, I’m entitled to a degree” (p. 103).

Delucchi and Korgen (2002) endorsed a “student as customer” model outside the classroom but not within it. “If colleges and universities are simply supplying a product, shouldn’t the consumer be sovereign? No. While material objects such as dormitories and
student centers may be made more ‘consumer friendly,’ the classroom should not be judged by such standards” (p. 106). They suggested instead that “[P]rofessors must have the freedom and authority necessary to motivate learners rather than merely focusing on entertaining them and assigning what students consider an acceptable grade” (p. 106). Delucchi and Korgen thus provide a distinction in the scholarly work: the difference between the learning that happens in the classroom with students and professors versus the interaction of students with support personnel.

Taylor (2006) argued that a consumer orientation impacts higher education. Today’s student may view education “as a commodity to be consumed, acquired, accumulated (credit hours), not as a personal, created, transformational process” (p. 4). Moreover, students’ “postmodern sensibilities and consumer approach to education are a remarkably poor fit with what schools traditionally offer” (p. 1). He warned that the increased move to customer service models, which may be perpetuated by the recruitment process, might have an unintended impact that of encouraging students to believe that tuition money purchases a degree rather than an opportunity to learn. Business relationships based on a customer service model could have long-reaching effects, such as negotiating and possible legal action when expectations are not reached (Taylor, 2006).

**Customer Service and Employees in Higher Education**

Like the student-as-customer issue, research on customer service itself in higher education is in its infancy. Godwin and Markham (1996) provided an early venture into understanding service experiences of freshman in the college bureaucracy. They explored traditional college students coming into their first bureaucratic environment as an adult.
The student interviews concerning bureaucracy on the college campus presented five major themes: “lines and waiting, impersonality, rules, ‘the run around,’ and paperwork” (p. 671). Godwin and Markham noted the role of parents in the service experience in the bureaucratic setting on the college campus. The students and staff involved in the study reported different perceptions of the parental involvement in the bureaucracy, but Godwin and Markham noted that “the mere presence of parents may have helped to ensure a more responsive treatment” (p. 683), while college freshmen typically conform because it is seen as a “natural order” (p. 688).

Hallenbeck (2006) explored a variety of Strategic Enrollment Management issues, including customer service. She stated that colleges and universities are focusing more on the customer service experiences of all the constituents, including students. Institutions are reviewing possible improvements in a variety of areas and expanding hours to meet student (customer) needs.

Sines and Duckworth (1994) addressed the need for college administrators to accept the task of focusing on customer service because of the major impact it has on the recruitment and retention of students. The authors suggested that colleges and chief administrators need to understand that they must demand “more than quality classroom instruction” (p. 3) because students/customers will demand more. Sines and Duckworth provided examples from business and encouraged college administrators to declare student-centered research a priority focusing on all current students, students who have lodged complaints, and students who are no longer attending the institution. This research needs to be an ongoing priority so that decisions are always based on timely and relevant data. Losing a student due to poor customer service has a financial impact, since it is
more expensive to recruit a new student than to keep existing students engaged and well served.

The negative impact of managing in a reactive rather than a proactive manner and the impact it has on the student/customer experience in a college or university setting was discussed by Black (1995). The quantitative data provided by Black (1995) indicated both positive and negative impact of employee satisfaction on customer service on the campus Black’s work suggests that employee satisfaction in areas such as achievement and recognition may increase the service level delivered, while dissatisfaction with salary and work conditions may decrease the service level delivered (p. 58). The author recommended using professional development opportunities to prepare staff to address student needs.

Hypocrisy was noted by Chitwood (1996) who wrote about what he considered a major hypocrisy of the community college system: the fact that community colleges have typically provided customized training to other businesses but have not provided customized service training to their own staff. The author used qualitative research to consider how internal service departments at Okaloosa-Walton Community College provided training on quality service to its own service workers so they could, in turn, provide higher quality customer service to students. While the research indicated that Okaloosa-Walton Community College was performing well, Chitwood stated that the college also needed to continue to improve to keep students happy and content.

Summary

In higher education research, there have been arguments for and against students as customers based on the “customer is always right” concept. Scott (1999), as well as
Sines and Duckworth (1994) have suggested that scholarly colleagues research the topic rather than simply shun the idea. Delucchi and Korgen (2002), drawing a distinction between what happens in and beyond the classroom, indicated that a customer-service mentality is more critical with services outside the classroom.

Researchers need to continue to pursue answers to the questions related to how students and staff perceive students as customers. Scholars also need to research Millennial student expectations, and that of their parents, to better understand how quality service might impact the community college student service experience.

The implications for practice are relevant to professional development efforts for service staff. Research can be used to better inform professional development decisions. Service staff can become more knowledgeable about effective customer service, while understanding that good service doesn’t always have to mean that the customer is always right.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to explore how Millennial generation students experience the services they receive in the community college setting at Kirkwood Community College. Also explored will be the participants’ perceptions of their role as customer at the Kirkwood Community College’s main campus, a large comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa. This chapter outlines the research approach, including methodology, design, methods, and the theoretical perspective.

First, the chapter will provide an overview of the qualitative approach to be used, including the selected epistemology and theoretical perspective, as well as the methodology and methods used in the design. The chapter will also introduce the site for the research, the data collection and analysis procedures, and strategies for ensuring goodness and trustworthiness. A description of the eligible participants follows. Finally, the chapter will close with a discussion of researcher positionality.

Qualitative Approach

With this study I seek to understand the experiences and perceptions of Millennial students on a community college campus. This goal to understand their lived experiences and perceptions is a natural fit for qualitative research design (Crotty, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). A qualitative approach allows for a clear and meaningful picture of the current situation and future possibilities. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) wrote:

“Social research is not about categorizing and classifying, but figuring out what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and
around them. Interpretive social researchers emphasize the complexity of human life. Time and context are important and social life is seen as constantly changing” (p. 34-35).

Qualitative research allows researchers to emphasize the very complexity of human life that Rubin and Rubin wrote about. With the qualitative research design must come a discussion of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Each component is addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

**Epistemology**

A constructive epistemology lends itself well to this research because of the relative newness of the topic. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) wrote, “If the paradigm is constructivist, the writer will present a text that stresses emergent understandings” (p. 67). Additionally, the answer to the research questions will be best determined by learning about the human interactions from the participants because everything we will learn is socially constructed (Crotty, 2003) by the Millennial students and those they encounter on the community college campus. Thus, a constructivist epistemology anchored my study.

The constructive epistemology is complemented by a theoretical framework based on Strange’s and Banning’s (2001) constructed environments theory discussed in chapter one. They noted that “constructed models of the environment focus on the subjective views and experiences of participant observers, assuming that environments are understood best through the collective perceptions of the individuals within them” (p. 86).
Theoretical Perspective and Framework

Along with the constructivist epistemology, a basic interpretive approach was incorporated for my theoretical perspective. A basic interpretive approach allows the researcher to seek meaning and understand the social world. “Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning of a phenomenon has for those involved” (Merriam, 2002, 37). This phenomenological study attempts to better understand the service environment on community college campuses through the collective perceptions of Millennial students.

Methodology

Berger and Luckman (1967) noted that the job of the phenomenologist is to capture how people construct their realities. In order to do this job, there needs to an understanding of both the abstract meanings and procedural issues related to the methodology.

As Creswell (2003) noted, the philosophical background is critical to understanding the proper use of phenomenology in research studies. “A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). In discussing Edmund Husserl’s concept of phenomenology, Crotty (2003) notes that phenomenology not only provides qualitative researchers a place to start but a “methodology that requires a return to that experience at many points along the way” (p. 85).

Patton (2002) noted that phenomenological research should focus on what people experience and how they experience phenomena. This means the research should focus on the experience of others and not the researcher’s own experiences. One of the
foundational ideas of the phenomenological methodology, which allows the research to
fully focus on the participant’s experience, is called “epoche.”

Thus one will take it in part as a gross exaggeration, in part as an absurdity, if I
say in advance that the properly understood universality, totally changes all the
notions that one could ever have of the task of psychology, and it reveals
everything that was just put forward as obvious to be a naïveté which necessarily
and forever becomes impossible as soon as the epoche and the reduction are
actually, and in their full sense, understood and carried out (p. 247) (Husserl

“In Epoche, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about
things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Ashworth (1999) called this practice “bracketing” and
enlarged the definition beyond personal opinions, assumptions, and ideals. At times, he
noted, setting aside empirical knowledge can help the researcher get to the essence of
meaning. As an example he gave a study on cheating, suggesting that when presupposed
ideas are bracketed it is easier to really listen to the participant. Previous quantitative
research in the area of cheating in higher education had focused on severity, punishment,
and organizational issues related to student cheating; without bracketing that knowledge
it would have been difficult to hear what the participants really said and felt about their
own experiences.

In addition to bracketing, the concept of epoch has also been referred to as
phenomenological reduction. One constant in the writing and thinking on epoche and
bracketing is the underlying agreement of its difficulty and its importance. The issues
requiring bracketing specific to me, as a researcher, and this study are explored later in
the chapter in the positionality section.

On the other hand, Ashworth (1999) indicated that researchers sometimes need to
reveal a context for the participants, putting into practice the “assumption of a shared
topic. [T]he fact that the research interviews have to be introduced to the interviewee as being ‘about’ something, and that this in itself will provide a shared focus, is a major presupposition. If we tried to bracket thoroughly such presuppositions, the conversations would be directionless” (p. 719).

Ashworth’s call for revealing this “assumption of a shared topic” has impacted the design for this study. Preliminary conversations with students who fit the participant criteria convinces me that providing a backdrop for the participants’ interviews as a study related to customer services and student-as-customer would make the interviews richer and more meaningful but would influence the interview. So I made the decision to withhold the term customer until the final follow up question of the second interview, therefore allowing the term to be introduced without impacting earlier answers.

**Methods**

Seidman (2006) and Creswell (2003) remind us of advantages of interviews, including control by the researcher, the ability to capture historical information, and the ability to learn about things that cannot be observed. Creswell (2003) also noted some limitations to the interview method, including the impact that the researcher’s presence has on the participants and their response. Cresswell cautioned that participants vary in their ability to articulate their experiences. Also, an interview “provides information in a designated ‘place’ rather than the natural field setting” (p. 186) and an interview “provides ‘indirect’ information filtered through the views of interviewees” (Creswell, p. 186).

As noted earlier, the chosen methodology is phenomenology, using semi-structured interviews “to explore a topic more openly” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87).
Interviews allowed me to learn about and gain an understanding of the very phenomena that I sought to understand. Because the quality of the interviews has a tremendous impact on the quality of the study, I planned and tested the interview questions with two Millennial students carefully prior to beginning interviews.

The philosophical underpinnings of the term “epoche” are the starting point for the interview stage of the phenomenological study. One of the first steps of the interview involves ensuring that the researcher’s “past associations, understandings, ‘facts,’ and biases are set aside and do not color or direct the interview” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 116). Moustakes suggests that there may be a need to repeat this process of epoche during the interview stage. Doing so, I consistently reminded myself of my personal experiences and knowledge background that might influence the research if not effectively and continually bracketed.

In addition, as Esterberg (2002) suggested, prior to the study I considered the desired relationship with the interview participants, the need to gain access, the structure of the interview, and the types of information the researcher and the participants would exchange during the interview process.

Seidman (2006) shared insight into what has “come to be called, in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing” (p. 15). Within this approach the research uses a large percentage of open-ended questions that allow the participant to share their experiences and their own socially constructed meanings with the researcher. Seidman’s approach helped guide the question development.

Interviews were the primary method of the data collection, but observation was another important method used to collect data. The field notes developed during the
observations refreshed my memory of the observations and allowed the triangulation of data. The observations provided an additional lens to help understand the student service experience at Kirkwood Community College.

Observations included the three levels of observations discussed in Denzin and Lincoln (2005): descriptive observation, focused observation, and selective observation. The descriptive observation included noting the general setting of each observation site and those people in the setting. The focused observations turned to the individuals involved in the service experience, both those providing the service – Kirkwood employees – and those receiving service, Kirkwood students. “Focused observation where the researcher looks only at material that is pertinent to the issue at hand, often concentrating on well-defined categories of group activity,” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 732, 2005). The selective observation further narrowed the people observed to be Millennial generation students.

**Data Collection**

In preparation for the interviews the questions need to be designed to effectively capture the “lived experience” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 54). In other words, the interview questions provide the basis for in-depth interviews with participants who have lived the experience or phenomenon this research seeks to understand. The questions are the tools for capturing the participants’ experience. Before beginning the interviews, the questions were tested with two Millennial students (one male and one female) to confirm that the questions spoke to the desired audience. The test did not lead to many changes except for the major decision to not use the word customer until the very end of the interview process.
The tone of the questions for the interviews was open and friendly. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) wrote:

*Traditional techniques tell us that the researcher is involved in an informal conversation with the respondent, thus he or she must maintain a tone of “friendly” chat while trying to remain close to the guidelines of the topics of inquiry he or she has in mind. (p. 67).*

The data collection consisted of two in-depth interviews with eight participants plus some additional email follow up after the completion of the interviews. Saturation was reached after the seventh participant; however, the eighth participant had been previously selected to offer additional male perspective, so the interviews with him were conducted and used in the study. Saturation is the “point in the study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new” (Seidman, 2006, p. 47).

Each interview was between 30 and 75 minutes in length. The participants were asked to review early themes and their interview transcripts for member-checking, which Merriam describes as taking “your tentative findings back to some of the participants (from whom you derived the raw data through interviews or observations) and asking whether your interpretation “rings true.” (Merriam, 2002, p. 26). Member checking occurred at three points throughout the research: during the second interview, when all transcription was completed, and during data analysis stage.

Participants were also encouraged to share additional insights or experiences with the researcher via phone, personal visit, or email over the course of the study. Two participants initiated email comments outside of the interviews and five responded to the request to review themes and transcripts after the final interviews. The five participants confirmed the early themes and transcripts were accurate.
Interviews were conducted on the Kirkwood Community College campus in a quiet, private space agreed upon by the researcher and participant. All interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. The tapes, my notes, and the transcripts were collected and kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home office where they remain until the dissertation has been approved.

The site selection for observations was limited to Kirkwood Community College’s main campus in Cedar Rapids because this is where the student participants attend classes and interact with service departments. The specific campus sites selected were based on the office or service centers most often mentioned in participant interviews. The selected observation sites were the college-owned bookstore, the financial aid office (also known as the One-Stop), the advising and transfer center, the college-owned convenience store and coffee shop (also known as the C-store) and the college cafeteria (also known as Sammy’s). Each site was observed during the traditionally hectic first week of class in January 2009 and again during the third week of classes.

Field notes were compiled according to a pre-determined observation protocol. The observation protocol included the following steps. Each observation was started by documenting the physical space and the descriptive elements of the space. Esterberg (2002) suggests that these initial notes are critical because “after you have been in a setting for awhile, you will become habituated; that is, you won’t see certain things that you take for granted” (p. 74). Next, the general population of people within the space was noted and recorded and the service interactions between employees and students were noted. Finally, several students who appear to be Millennial generation members were
identified for specific, more precise observation. Field notes included both “descriptive and reflective notes (i.e., notes about your experiences, hunches, and learnings)” (Cresswell, 1998, p. 125). Field notes also captured direct quotes when the situation allowed.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis focused on the goal as described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995): “to produce a coherent, focused analysis of some aspect of the social life that has been observed and recorded, an analysis that is comprehensible to readers who are not directly acquainted with the social world at issue” (p. 142).

The key to providing this comprehensible view to readers is effective data analysis. The data analysis contained three distinct interrelated processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction was performed at several points in the study. First, I reduced the scope by carefully writing and selecting questions for the interviews with participants. This included testing questions and adjusting them based on the testing. The data reduction continued once the interviews had begun and transcripts were available for early analysis. After transcription was completed for each of the initial interviews, data analysis began with open coding done by hand. During this stage, I was immersed in the data and did not use predetermined codes (Esterberg 2002). In the line-by-line review “each word, phrase, or sentence is categorized and coded as a concept. Concept names are selected to accurately reflect and describe what the data conveyed” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 44). Since I have found it useful in the past, I listened to the tapes of
the interviews while coding to keep the voice of the participants at the forefront of my thinking. This was followed by focused coding to identify themes.

I used the process of data display as I developed themes. The use of visuals indicating these themes allowed me to step back as a researcher and look at the themes in a different light. During the data display process, I began conclusion drawing and verification, which calls on researchers to “draw meaning from displayed data” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 181). The results from the observation analysis were blended into the data display created from interview findings and offered additional insight into the conclusion drawing and verification.

**Goodness and Trustworthiness**

The goal in quantitative research with a phenomenological approach is to “attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 23). Several strategies contribute to the goodness and trustworthiness of the research. The transcripts and emerging themes were shared with the participants for member checking and the draft analysis was shared with colleagues for peer debriefing to ensure accuracy, as recommended by many scholars (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Different methods for qualitative research have strengths and weaknesses; thus researchers use more than one method. Using two or more data collection methods is known as “triangulation” (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Triangulation using literature review, interviews and observations added to the goodness and trustworthiness of this study.
Another important component of the goodness and trustworthiness is the “adequate engagement in data collection” (Merriam, 2002). This was achieved by conducting all interviews myself, by continuing to listen to tapes during the analysis stage, and conducting all observations myself. Before starting the research I acknowledged my positionality and continued to revisit it throughout the research process to ensure goodness and trustworthiness. As a researcher, I kept an audit trail and memos to document the research process and my thoughts related to the research.

This final report includes rich, thick descriptions allowing the participants’ own voices to be heard by all who read the research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). In addition, the report ends with an exhaustive reflexivity section acknowledging my personal bias and life experiences which needed to be bracketed.

**Participants**

Participants were chosen from students enrolled in Kirkwood Community College. The participants were initially recruited from the population of liberal arts students attending the college’s main campus in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Several of the participants who volunteered for the study identified themselves as students who were completing general education requirements to prepare to transfer to four-year institutions; these volunteers were determined to be eligible for the study. Students in applied science programs were not included in the study because the cohort nature of their studies has the potential to make their educational and service experience significantly different than the liberal arts major or student preparing to transfer after completing general education course work.
Eligible participants were Millennial generation students (born after 1982). Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and must have completed at least one semester at Kirkwood Community College. Because a goal of the research is to “extend interpretive privilege to a wide range of voices, assigning narrative competence to all” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 25), a variety of voices were solicited within this targeted group.

The recruitment posters and flyers (see Appendix H) were posted and distributed in high traffic areas on the Kirkwood Community College main campus early in the fall 2008 semester. While it proved unnecessary, the research protocol was designed to deal with excess interested students by using purposeful sampling to narrow the pool by using a “method that implies a plan for identifying those who may shed light on a particular phenomena” (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2006, p.72).

Student volunteers were asked to self report the college departments that they had interactions with on campus. The research plan was to include those who self reported interaction with the most service departments on campus. The sampling plan included consideration for gender-balanced participation, to ensure the greatest breadth of experiences or, in other words, those that would “best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185).

The plan was designed to select students with the most interaction with the community college while reducing the possibility of bias. While the plan was not needed due to the number of volunteers, it did guide the decision to include the eighth participant, a male student, after saturation had already been achieved to provide better representation for the male perspective of the phenomena of service. Eight students
participated in two in-depth interviews. The participant group included six women and two men. The participants’ birth years range from 1983 through 1990. The group consisted of one Japanese international student, one African-American student, and six Caucasian students.

To compensate for the time involved in the research study, the participants were given a $15 Casey’s General Store gift card, a local convenience store that students tend to frequent, after the first in-depth interview, as well as $15 Casey’s General Store gift card after the second interview. The participants were informed that the compensation included transcript and theme review for member checking. Each student signed a Research Participant Receipt Form to verify the compensation was received (see Appendix I).

**Human Subjects Approval and Informed Consent**

The study plan for this research was submitted for approval to the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board prior to conducting research involving human subjects (see Appendix E). Upon approval, flyers were posted and distributed in high traffic areas on campus. The study, in particular the expectation of two in-depth interviews as well as transcript and theme review, was explained to each student who expressed an interest in being a participant. Three qualified students declined to participate after the study was orally explained to them. Two interested students were studying in applied science programs (nursing and industrial maintenance programs) and determined to be ineligible.

The eight qualified students who volunteered to be participants completed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D) prior to the first interview. After each
interview, unedited drafts of the transcripts were shared with the individual participant for member checking. (Transcripts were later cleared of “um’s” and “ah’s” and other nonessential words.) Early themes were also shared with the participants during the second interviews for member checking. Final themes and participant narratives were also shared with participants for additional member checking.

**Positionality and Role of the Researcher**

Because of my experiences as a first-generation community college student many years ago, I am deeply and personally interested in customer service in all non-academic arenas within the community college. I must therefore acknowledge and bracket my personal experiences related to the topic. My position as Vice President of Enrollment at a Kirkwood Community College adds to my interest because I respond to non-instructional escalated student complaints. Many of these complaints revolve around customer services, or lack thereof, in college departments. I acknowledge my “perspective and relationship to the problem” in recognizing my positionality (Merriam, 2002, p. 23). In this positionality I acknowledge that this is “backyard research” as I will conduct it at the institution where I am a senior administrator (Jones, 2002, p. 464). Additionally, my position causes me to focus on providing good research for use by scholarly practitioners, as suggested by Arminio and Hultgren (2002).

As the researcher I was the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of the data. I personally conducted all interviews, which allowed me to fully appreciate the experiences of the participants.
CHAPTER FOUR  
RESEARCH AND THEMES

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the participants who were interviewed for this study and to introduce the specific locations where observations occurred on the Kirkwood Community College main campus in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The themes that emerged during the observations on Kirkwood Community College’s campus, as well as during the interviews with the eight participants, are discussed in this chapter. The conclusions are presented and organized according to four major themes: Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality, Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Levels, Theme Three: Familiarity Leads to Contentment, not Contempt, and Theme Four: The Writing is on the Wall.

Participants

The participants of this study were an interesting mix of Millennial students. As is always true in qualitative research, one of the goals is to give them a voice and “introduce” the participants to the research world. Oldfather and West (1994) used the metaphor of qualitative research as jazz, with every participant and researcher adding a new sound. “Those who have traditionally been the ‘researched’ are assuming more active roles. They pull their trumpets out of the closet and find new ways to weave their own themes and variations (both old and new) into the tunes of the occasion” (p. 25). Each participant added many notes and rhythm to the study.
Each participant has been assigned a fictitious name to protect his/her privacy. Several participants mentioned their high school by name during the interviews, so fictional names have also been assigned to the high schools to ensure participant privacy.

_Tanya_

Tanya (born in 1989) just finished her first semester as a liberal arts major at Kirkwood. She graduated from a large local high school and continues to live with her parents in Cedar Rapids. Tanya is a first-generation college student who plans to earn a Masters of Occupational Therapy in the future. Tanya was a quiet but thoughtful person throughout her interviews. She preferred to answer in as few words as possible, but she chose her words carefully.

Tanya was able to find a nanny position to help fund her college education on Kirkwood’s job website, which she learned about through her official college mentor. Tanya has been involved in the college’s voluntary mentor program which matches interested first-year students with employees who volunteer to serve as a mentor. She has received extensive personal help from the Kirkwood staff member with whom she was matched.

I feel like the mentoring program has definitely helped me. Any question I have I ask my mentor, and she either knows the answer or finds out for me. I really feel like she goes out of her way to help me. I remember the first time I met up with her at the beginning of fall semester: I had mentioned that I had never been to the Recreation Center but was interested in using it, and she drove me up there and gave me a quick tour. She also has good advice and suggestions. After learning a little bit about me she suggested that I join Student Ambassadors. Although it's
not set in stone yet, I am taking the time to learn more and hope that it’s a good fit for me. She has also sort of advised me on classes – whether or not to take classes in the summer, course load, etc. I also feel that we have quite a bit in common and can talk about topics that don't pertain to school.

Doug

Doug (born in 1989) is a second-year student currently majoring in liberal arts with plans to change his major to paramedic specialist programming in the upcoming semester. He is unassuming and could blend well into any crowd, but his interview responses stood out because they were animated and rich. Doug attended high school in the Kirkwood Community College seven-county service area. “I went to Small Town High School which is about five miles south of here – a pretty small high school. I had 98 people in my graduating class, compared to some of the other schools around here like Kennedy and the bigger ones,” Doug shared.

Doug went on to explain how his smaller high school experience helped him choose Kirkwood Community College as his starting point for higher education.

Everybody is really surprised when I tell them I only had like 98 people in my class but it’s kind of nice, the fact that I knew everybody’s name and knew at least a little bit about everybody. So that was one of the things that I liked about going to a smaller school. I think that’s one of the main deciding factors for going to Kirkwood: it was a smaller setting, where you could really get to know people a lot better. It’s a lot friendlier atmosphere and that’s one of my big things. I would classify myself as a pretty friendly person, so I like to get to know things
about people, even if it’s not a lot. I can know the basic gist of a person, how they act in a certain setting or whatever, in the classroom especially.

During his first year Doug lived in a near campus apartment, but after his roommate left college, Doug eventually moved back home with his parents to save money.

I was really surprised, actually – moving back home was probably one of the best decisions that I’ve made; it gives me a lot more time and a lot better environment to focus on my studies. I’ve been doing a lot better since I moved back in at home.

Jake

Jake (born in 1987) is a student-athlete who is a liberal arts major. Jake is soft spoken and a man of few words. Unlike many of the participants, Jake is not a local student continuing his education at Kirkwood.

I was born in London, England; my father played professional soccer in Europe. I lived there until I was about three or four. I moved to the Maryland, Washington, D.C. area. I grew up in Maryland and my mom is from Ghana. My dad is Jamaican and I have two sisters. I went to elementary and middle school in Maryland; I went to high school in Maryland for two years. A school called and I transferred to North Carolina.

After a successful high school athletic career, he was heavily recruited by Fordham, Kent State, Loyola, and others but academically ineligible to play for colleges under the umbrella of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. While at Kirkwood Community College, his goal is to regain his academic eligibility and help win a national
championship before transferring to a four year college. Jake lives in near campus housing with another athlete.

**Molly**

Molly (born in 1988) is a second-year student at Kirkwood, completing business prerequisite courses with a plan to transfer to the business college at the University of Iowa. Molly is an outgoing young woman who seems to make friends with everyone she meets. She attended a large local high school in Cedar Rapids with a graduation class of close to 600. Her decision to attend Kirkwood Community College was a natural one. “Actually I’m from Cedar Rapids. I was born and raised here and went to a local high school. I figured this was close to home, so I wanted to go here.”

She has worked on campus in a variety of settings, which has allowed her to meet many students and employees. She fell into her first campus job while visiting campus the summer before starting classes.

I was just on campus, wandering around just to get a feel of it, and I walked through the bookstore and saw someone that I knew who was working. She was like “Oh, you should apply, we’re hiring for rush,” which is the busy time before classes start. So I applied. I was only going to stay for rush and then I did such a good job that I’m still working there a year and a-half later.

Molly lives with her mother while attending Kirkwood and does not intend to move out until she transfers to the University of Iowa in the fall.

**Sally Jo**

Sally Jo (born in 1988) is a talkative third-year student at Kirkwood who spent a year pursuing challenging engineering pre-requisite courses before changing her major to
liberal arts. Sally Jo has a big personality to match her robust physical stature. She is animated and outgoing, likely from her years as a self-described “military brat” living around the country.

My dad was in the military for 20 years and I was actually born at St. Lukes in Cedar Rapids. They were living overseas, and they were kind of in a cool situation because my aunt worked for a doctor that delivered me. She was 15 at the time and they got the call; my dad was supposed to be playing golf and didn’t have a phone – they didn’t have cell phones – and my mom was trying to figure out how to contact him. Finally somebody found him and so they had to fly home immediately. My mom stayed here for a month and then we moved back. We also lived in California, then New Mexico, Illinois, and Florida. When we were in Florida, my dad decided we had to move back here.

In addition to attending Kirkwood for two and a-half years, Sally Jo took a college credit class her senior year at a small high school less than 10 miles away from Kirkwood’s main campus. “I took a college class in high school. It was at my school but my teacher was certified to teach Kirkwood classes. She actually teaches here now.” Sally Jo’s connections to the college do not stop there. Her father, now retired from the United States Air Force, works at Kirkwood, and she worked in the college bookstore and convenience store for over a year.

She left campus employment for a higher paying job with Nordstrom Direct in customer service. “I’m a personal shopper so I take phone calls, such as if people are having problems with their orders or if they want to place an order. We get lots of feedback calls sometimes about problems people have in stores and you deal with
everything.” Sally Jo lives at home with her parents and plans to transfer to a small, private college next year.

_Sally Jo_

_Sally Jo_ lives at home with her parents and plans to transfer to a small, private college next year.

_Bob_

Bob (born in 1988) is a second-year student who has enjoyed his college experience at Kirkwood. “It’s been pretty good. The teachers help a lot. They’re willing to come in extra hours to help study or make up things, and it seems like a lot of them really want you to do well and succeed.”

Bob attended a large local high school and is active in his family church as well as the college-sponsored Christian and music organizations on campus. “My parents are from Marshalltown and I went to Big Town High School and graduated there in ’07. I played baseball, ran track, played in the jazz and concert band and marching band, and I played trombone.”

His major is liberal arts while he makes a decision between transferring to a business college or seminary school next year. “I might look into a theology degree.” But when asked about which schools he is considering, he admits that he has not researched his options “as much as I should.”

_Angie_

Angie is the veteran in the group of participants, both in terms of age (born in 1983) and life experience. She is also the only participant to have earned a GED rather than a high school diploma.

I actually had a GPA of 4.0 all throughout school – middle school, high school. I loved school. I ended up getting my GED because of an incident that happened at
one of my old high schools. I’ve had two high schools and after I got my GED, I decided to come here to Kirkwood. I absolutely enjoy it.

She is a single parent of a four and a-half year-old son and a year-old daughter, so juggling family and school is a challenge.

Actually my biggest problem was I took College 101 and we did a time management where we monitored our time, because I didn’t think I had a lot of time with my kids. I’m actually lacking in sleep; I have four and a-half hours of sleep a night.

The College 101 experience helped her learn how to better manage her time.

“Literally my development psychology class provides my son’s bedtime stories; he loves the human body, so I read my homework to him and he gets read to and we’re all happy.”

In addition to attending Kirkwood Community College for the last year, Angie cleans local vacant apartments to supplement her financial aid for living expenses. She is liberal arts major simply because she is undecided about her path. Angie lives about 20 minutes from campus.

**Evelyn**

Evelyn (born in 1988) is a second-year student taking classes to prepare for a transfer to the University of Iowa, where she plans to major in biology with the long-term goal of medical school. Evelyn came to Iowa to attend high school as a foreign exchange student from Japan. “Before I went to Large High School, I lived in Tokyo for 16 years. I came here as an exchange student.” She enjoyed her experience in Cedar Rapids, so she decided to stay and attend Kirkwood. While she was a swimmer in high school, she is not active in any college activities. “Right now, I’m too busy with studying, homework, and
work.” Evelyn lives in an apartment near campus and has visited her family in Japan twice in the last three years. Evelyn would like to remain in the United States after finishing college.

**Observation Sites**

The site selection for observation was limited to Kirkwood Community College’s main campus. The specific sites selected were based on the office or service centers most often mentioned in participant interviews. The selected observation sites were the college-owned bookstore, the financial aid office, the advising and transfer center, the college cafeteria, and the C-Store. Each was observed during the hectic first week of class in January 2009 and again during the third week of classes.

**Bookstore**

The college-owned bookstore is in a relatively new facility built about four years ago. The first floor is flooded with natural light and is full of colorful merchandise, such as college clothing, coffee mugs, and numerous incidentals. The first floor also contains all the cash registers, including a bank of six for purchases and one separated from the bank for returns. The second floor can be reached via the elevator and the open staircase to the back of the store. The second floor houses all the textbooks and required classroom supplies, as well as general school supplies. Multiple computers are available for students to print class lists, and there is a help desk. Both the floors have soft seating for students to enjoy and both floors have staff members assisting customers.

**Financial Aid**

The financial aid office, also known as the One Stop center, was mentioned by several participants. While analyzing the field notes it was important to consider the time
frame of the recalled experiences. During the summer of 2008, the second floor of Kirkwood Hall, which houses business services, financial aid, and enrollment services, was remodeled to replace a large gray four-foot-tall counter that ran the full length of the floor with an open floor plan in rich, warm browns. The remodeled space allows students to sit comfortably when receiving service, rather than standing at a counter. The new space also allows students to sign in and sit on soft seats while waiting for service rather than standing in multiple lines near the imposing counter. Students and other visitors are greeted by a bright One Stop logo projected from the ceiling onto the floor. The logo, plus blue footprints, draw the attention to the computer where students sign in to wait for assistance. The space and service model has changed dramatically over the last 12 months.

Cafeteria

The college cafeteria, Sammy’s, serves three meals each day when classes are in session. Sammy’s has a small but pleasant serving space that includes a deli sandwich line, a hot food line with a choice of several hot food options, a salad bar, and a variety of grab-and-go prepackaged items. The check-out area has four cash registers with two used on a regular basis. The dining area looks out onto the heart of the campus with floor-to-ceiling windows lining the area. The area allows for both small and a large group dining options. The dining area is busiest from 11:00-1:30 each day but is used throughout the day.

Advising and Transfer Center

The next site for observation was the advising and transfer center. This center is a relatively small space with a reception area that seats about 10 people. Behind the
reception desk are walls of private offices, including five for academic advisors and one for a records evaluator. The center also has a soft seating area directly outside the office suite which is separated by glass. I was able to act as a non-participant observer in all settings except for the advising center, where it was not possible to observe without employees noticing me. I observed from the soft seating outside the office suite, which meant that I could not hear the conversations during these observations.

_C-Store_

The C-Store is a combination convenience store and coffee shop that opened in fall 2005. It was a new addition to the campus environment that soon became a main hub for student and employee traffic as well as a popular place for student employment. The C-Store is flooded with natural light that glistens off the stainless steel appliances and shiny tile floor. The student workers stand out in their bright blue shirts as they work steadily to the beat of popular music. Located immediately across from the new and equally inviting bookstore, this hallway is a high-traffic area, especially with the opening of a new academic wing, which since January 2009 has been located just beyond the C-Store.

_Themes and Analysis_

Four distinct themes emerged from the data collected during interviews and observations, with supporting evidence from existing literature. The themes are:

- **Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality**
  - What else could I expect?
  - Kirkwood People are Nice
  - The 24/7 generation
Students as Customers?

- Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Level
- Theme Three: Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt
- Theme Four: The Writing on the Wall

**Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality**

It is often noted in everyday life that expectations influence reality. This concept surfaced as a major theme in this study to determine how Millennial generation students describe their experiences with service staff on a community college campus. The expectations are one of the human characteristics that determine the environment on campuses. “These human characteristics influence the degree to which people are attracted to, satisfied within, and retained by those environments” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 33). The Expectations Equal Reality theme contains four predominant sub-themes worth highlighting: 1) What Else Could I Expect?, 2) Kirkwood People are Nice, 3) The 24/7 Generation, and 4) Students are Customers?

**What Else Could I Expect?**

During initial observations, as a researcher, I noted situations related to service quality that did not meet my personal expectations. The impact of these personal expectations will be addressed in chapter five in the reflexivity section. These observations provided a lens for the analysis on the interviews and the second round of observations, including examples of lines with long wait times, abrupt service, and inability to answer all questions presented by students. The observation also included service delivered with a smile, employees going above and beyond, and knowledgeable staff. Observation data in support of the sub-theme is addressed first.
Long lines in the college-owned bookstore were prevalent during an observation that occurred the second day of the Spring 2009 semester. However, when two students initially entered the book store, the lines did not appear to be their first concern. The two female students, who appeared to be traditional-age college students and therefore Millennial Generation members, entered the store and browsed the traditional college apparel and miscellaneous merchandise on the first floor. The first student was tall and slender with long blond hair. Her denim jeans frayed over the top of her Ugg boots. She wore a simple white long-sleeved shirt. Soon after walking in, she slipped a Kirkwood sweatshirt over her head.

Her companion, similar in build and wearing a large winter coat and a messy bun in her hair, looked to the back of the store and nudged her friend as she motioned to the line that started on first floor and weaved its way up the stairs to second floor. The line served as a call to action as the first female removed the Kirkwood sweatshirt and replaced it on the display. Next the pair moved to second floor to retrieve their needed textbooks.

Within 15 minutes the two were in the line, which now reached the top landing of the stairs. As they waited in line for the next 35 minutes, they alternated between holding their books and setting them at their feet while they visited. At times they fidgeted and appeared impatient, as did those around them. They read signs as they moved to the correct place in line for financial aid purchases. Both students moved to a register at the same time and both completed their transactions in about six minutes after reaching the register. They walked out the door approximately one hour after entering. Their body
language and verbal exchange with the cashiers seemed to indicate the wait was acceptable to both of the students.

During this same time period, a male student with dark, curly hair, who appeared to be Millennial age, stopped to read a sign announcing the financial aid purchases required a current Eagle Card, the official college student identification card. He found a young student worker to ask a question. She couldn’t explain why the card was required but showed him how to get to the Eagle Card office from the bookstore. The curly-haired student left the store, appearing content with the directions to visit the Eagle Card office.

In addition to bookstore observations, the sub-theme, What Else Could I Expect?, was evident in the college cafeteria.

During a separate observation on the next day at Sammy’s Café, a worker making deli sandwiches startled an older customer standing in line with a command to fill out his order form. “Fill out the form and put it here.” The customer appeared flustered and quickly completed an order form and placed it on the counter, then waited patiently for his sandwich to be made. While this observation was a non-Millennial generation student, his experience mirrors what was described in interviews related to the sandwich counter but no one indicates the service did not meet expectations..

Finally the two observations in the financial aid office also indicated that at certain times students seem to expect to wait and do so fairly willingly. The first visit the week before classes found nearly forty people seating in chairs and on the floor as well as standing against the walls waiting to see one of five front line financial aid personnel wearing matching white and blue Kirkwood polo shirts. The group waiting to be helped appeared to be predominantly Millennial generation students.
During this observation, students entered the office area and signed in to a computer to indicate the reason for their visit. After sign in, most students waited approximately 20-25 minutes to talk to an employee. Students spent their wait time watching national news on one of two flat screen televisions, listening to music on iPods, visiting with other students or texting on cell phones. While a few students appeared impatient and complained to those around them, most waited patiently and helped before going on their way.

The observations were supported by the interviews. The interviews seemed to indicate the participants held fairly low expectations of the required service level, so they were not easily disappointed in the service.

Sally Jo shared her experience in the line at the cashier’s desk the day before classes one semester. “It was the day before classes, so they obviously aren’t going to be happy. I wouldn’t want to sit there and type this in and make sure everybody’s paid and talk to people about how they really haven’t paid,” explained Sally Jo.

Sally Jo went on to explain some frustration with her fellow students in line, but she empathized with the staff members who were serving the students.

There’s usually about 10-15 people in line. It was like a ton of people and people would walk up and we were all sitting and there were people lined up. I was sitting with my friend on the bench and people would come up and get in line and I’d say, “I’m sitting but I’m still in line, what are you doing?” It was just crazy in there because the financial aid is up there, and there was just a ton of people. A lot of people didn’t know where to go. Up there it is a stressful time when the
semester starts. Financial aid and all that other crazy stuff would be not fun to deal with.

Doug shared the empathic manner of Sally Jo when he described his 90-minute wait in the bookstore line.

I think you have to expect that you will wait in line for a little while. I have a tendency to procrastinate a little bit, and so I think this was probably three or four days before classes started, and it was kind of a big rush to go in and get books and everything.

Doug offered the explanation that the staff was probably overwhelmed by the line. In his opinion, the students took it in stride:

It was definitely hectic. A lot of the staff was running around and getting a little tired. A lot of the students go in there with a buddy or with one of their friends, so they go in together and they have to expect that you’re going to wait in line for a little bit. It’s never really a big deal; it was pretty laidback as far as the people in line.

Tanya also talked about her wait in the college bookstore: “I mean, right before school a lot of people are going to be there, so lines up the staircase aren’t a surprise.”

When asked if they could have improved the experience, she added, “They had all the employees and cash registers going, so not really.”

Bob discussed his experience waiting in financial aid. “The lines can be kind of long sometimes. If you go the last minute, it takes awhile, but if you get it done early, it doesn’t usually take that long.” Angie also talked about her experience in financial aid and accepted responsibility for getting “bumped around” while getting service: “That got
a little confusing with where to go. They bumped me around, back and forth, but I don’t think I was being clear with what I needed.”

Joel had learned to adjust his behavior to avoid long lines and receive better service. “I try to go later in the day so the wait is not as long. There will just be a few long lines and I can just give them my books.” This strategy of students changing their behavior to increase the likelihood of a good service experience is evident in observations, as well. In the C-Store it was clear that some experienced students tried to avoid the busiest time each hour, which is 15 minutes before the hour. One student who came in to the C-store during the down time seemed to know the employees well and visited with them while waiting for his Smoothie to be made. The conversation indicated that he visited the C-store often between his morning classes.

The Expectations Equal Reality theme and the What Else Could I Expect sub-theme indicate that student expectation is critical to the way the student perceives the service experience. The Millennial students observed and those interviewed appeared to be understanding during busy times. “I think that the service is well above average on campus. They always give you what you expect and probably more,” Michelle noted.

During the busy back-to-school week in January and following the initial interviews, Tanya sent an observation via email which supports this theme, What Else Could I Expect. Her awareness of service levels was likely raised due to the questions asked during interviews, but in the end, the understanding for the staff remained:

I finally got to experience the long lines at the bookstore, and it was quite ridiculous. The long line splits into Cash/Credit and Financial Aid/Scholarships, but that is unclear to the people standing at the top of the staircase. There was a
lot of frustration and I think that could have been eased by a simple explanation from the lady directing traffic. I was also slightly inconvenienced when my Eagle Card was not returned after being rung up. I returned a couple of days later to retrieve it. That was that...no big deal.

Here it seems that increased awareness leads to higher expectation and therefore can lead to less satisfaction with the service. The expectation theme blends well with a later theme, that of Millennial students being the 24/7 generation. Joel expressed this merging of themes when he said, “I would like stuff to be open at my convenience, but I know it can’t happen.” The observation and interview data that supports the What Else Can I Expect sub-theme provides a back drop for the remaining sub-themes that support the first major theme: Expectations Equal Reality.

*Kirkwood People are Nice*

The second sub theme to Expectations Equal Reality is Kirkwood People Are Nice. The Millennial students who participated in this study and those who were observed seem to be pleased, overall, with service experience and their interaction with Kirkwood Community College service workers. Angie described Kirkwood Community College employees this way: “They’re all absolutely nice.”

She went on to explain an interaction in the Eagle Card office. “When I went to get my new card he said, “So how are you doing?’ I had a nice conversation with him and he said, “Do you want to keep this old picture?’ and I’m like ‘Nope, not at all,’ so he let me get the new picture.” While the new picture probably wasn’t a major issue to the worker it left an extremely positive impression on Angie, as evidenced by the wide grin
on her face and her chuckle when she told the story and shared her new Eagle Card photo.

Molly confirmed the notion of Kirkwood workers being nice and helpful. “They seem to be really helpful. In every department, if they can’t answer you, they’ll get on the phone and try to find an answer or direct you to the right answer.”

Sally Jo first talked about positive service experiences around campus with a variety of departments. “Everybody on campus is really nice. Anytime I’ve had to go talk to business services about anything or really anybody in general, or an advisor, it seems like everybody really wants the best.” She proceeded to talk about a specific employee in Student Life: “She was always nice and she was really helpful and she’s willing to answer any random question I have.” This employee serves as a magnet and brings Sally Jo back often.

Tori agreed with the theme and noted one example in the Kirkwood Foundation office where she needed to go to sign a scholarship check. “Instead of just having me sign the check, she (scholarship director) took the time to ask who I was and what my plans were.” This same behavior was observed in the bookstore and the C-Store during the third weeks of classes. In the bookstore a cashier asked a Millennial-age student whether she was a first- or second-year student. She also asked about her major and what college she planned to attend next. The Millennial age female customer happily talked with the cashier and shared, “I have no idea where I’m going next, but my parents sure would like to know.” Both the Millennial student and the cashier ended the transaction with a smile on their faces.

A final comment from Evelyn: “I like Kirkwood people.”
The 24/7 Generation

“Whether it is immediacy with which a response is expected or the speed at which they are used to receiving information, the Net Gen is fast. They multitask, moving quickly from one activity to another, sometimes performing them simultaneously. They have fast response times, whether playing a game or responding to an IM” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 26) (Note: Net Gen is another term sometimes used for the generation with birthdates starting in the early 1980s.) Oblinger and Oblinger are one of many who have noted the need for immediacy in Millennial Generation.

This desire for access to information anytime and anywhere on a 24/7 basis has increased the importance of web services on college campuses. Kirkwood Community College responded to this need by dramatically redesigning the college website, www.kirkwood.edu, about five years ago. The college continues to modify the site on a regular basis to address new and emerging student needs. The participants supported the importance of the web access. Sally Jo explained,

A lot of the information is on the website, like paying your bill or even knowing when final exams are. Even if you have random questions – I know even like when I applied at Kirkwood, I needed to figure out what I needed to have sent there and how to get my ACT scores. Everything was on the website, so it seems like most of the departments, like advising, have a ton of stuff on the website. Angie, confirming Sally Jo’s opinion, shared:

It’s wonderful – my sister is actually starting next semester, and she’ll call me with some of her questions and I tell her just go to Eagle Net without even looking, because I already know it from just one and a-half semesters of school.
She can navigate it pretty easily. She’ll say, “Oh, I ran across that,” so it’s really easy, especially for new students also.

Doug explained that the web site was always his first avenue to answering a question and he enjoyed the ability to access it “at 3:00 a.m. in the morning or whatever.” However, he also noted that he understands all services cannot be expected 24/7, such as the library.

There are other things that you’re not going to be able to do because the personnel who work in that department have lives too; they need sleep, as well. So you’re not going to be able to get a library book at 4 a.m., but you could go online and maybe see if they have that library book. You kind of expect to be able to only access during the big things the 9-5 regular work day.

While Evelyn agreed with Doug that the library doesn’t need to be available 24/7, she would like additional hours of services. “The library needs more hours. Because we are students, we want to study and other colleges like Coe or Mercy are open until like 1:00 so that students can stay in until late. Here they’re only open until 9:00 or 8:00 or something.”

Evelyn also noted a concern about service hours related to the international office. “When I was in high school, I had a sport activity until 6:00 p.m. and so I didn’t have time to go there, and I didn’t have time to call them. I visited them and it was closed.” While she understood and didn’t expect 24/7 service, she did express a desire for slightly lengthened hours.

“I can understand that they can’t really have people available 24-7 because that would probably require somebody to be here, and I think the janitors and security people
are the only people who stay that late.” With this statement, Sally Jo confirmed that while 24/7 would be great, it is not expected. This sub-theme indicates that these Millennial participants have more realistic expectations than the 24/7 ideal that is often associated with their generation.

**Students as Customers?**

In keeping with the theme of Expectations Equal Reality, the use of the term “customer” appears to set the reality in a slightly different light. As the researcher, I carefully avoided the word customer during the interviews until at the end of the second interview of the first participant, when the term was introduced in a follow-up question based on Molly’s use of the term. While I only had one participant use the word in interviews prior to the question, they were each asked if they considered themselves a customer of the Kirkwood Community College.

Molly noted with great enthusiasm, “Oh I’m always a customer here. When I’m using any of the resources, like the Rec Center, I just feel like I’m always a customer here.”

Bob made a distinction about his different roles on campus. He shared that he was a student when in class but at other times he was a customer. He noted he is a customer “because I pay for a lot of my tuition and I buy quite a bit of food from the cafeteria, and I buy my books here.”

Evelyn made a similar distinction. “Customer – yes, when I go to the C-store and buy something.” However, when asked if there was an example of a time or place where she was not a customer, she added, “When I’m in my classes.”

Sally Jo weighed in on the topic as well:
Sometimes – it depends where you are. If I’m in class I’m a student and I’m here to learn. You obviously want to be respected by your teachers and all that stuff. But if you go to the C-Store and the cafeteria, then you’re technically a customer. But I think if you’re just here doing classes and that kind of thing, then you’re a student. I mean, I know you have to pay for it, but I don’t think you’re a customer.

Tanya seemed to agree with drawing the line between the classroom and service experiences. “I am a customer when I go to the C-store or even the bookstore because I’m using their services and purchasing things.” However, in the classroom, she said she was a student.

Not all participants supported this theme. Dan explained his perception of a customer and why it did not fit his community college experience. “A customer makes me think more like, you come in, get what you want, and leave, whereas with Kirkwood it feels like you come in, you get what you want, and then you leave, but they follow up.” Dan went on to explain that the term customer did not even apply when he was in the college C-Store, but it did apply when he was at the local Starbucks. Definitely at Starbuck, because they’re a business trying to make money, whereas the C-store is as well, but they have cheaper prices. I go down there quite frequently during the day and I know some of the people working there, so it makes all the difference.

Angie’s positive experiences made her disagree with the customer term, as well. She explained,
As far as a customer, I don’t feel like I’m paying them for services. I feel like my tuition is paying for a great thing. It’s a great school; a lot of things are offered here – more than I would have ever imagined. It’s more like a family environment than them trying to take our money and just run us through the system.

While most students felt they were a customer at times on the Kirkwood Community College Campus, their expectations appeared to be rather realistic for the collegiate environment. The Expectations Equal Reality is a diverse theme that addresses the impact the students’ expectations have on their service experiences at Kirkwood Community College. Gaining a better understanding of expectations may help ensure service experiences are positive.

Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Levels

Both interviews and observations support the theme Student Worker Impact Service Levels. In her interviews, Torie noted that she enjoyed the student workers on campus, and their presence increased satisfaction levels. “I think they’re just more personal. In the cafeteria, the workers remind me of high school lunch ladies; they’re just getting you through. Down in the C-store they’re students, so maybe that has to do with it.” She continued with a recollection of an interaction with a student worker in the convenience store: “The guy down there, he said he liked my scarf. He was just real friendly and not rushing me through or anything. I asked how the potato salad was and he answered.”

Observations confirmed the impact on the service experience of a compliment or a simple conversation with a student worker. In the C-store an energetic, young male student was working behind the counter during one observation. He greeted each student
with a smile and often commented on “great shoes” or “smokin’ outfit” in addition to asking how classes were going. One female student who appeared to be of Millennial age ordered a cold sandwich and the student worker noted, “Honey, you need some warm soup on a cold day like this.” The student smiled, laughed, and agreed. She happily left with a to-go container of tomato basil soup.

In contrast, on the next observation the C-store manager was working the counter; while she provided quick and friendly service, it lacked the connection that the male student worker, and his fellow student workers, made with students. She greeted each student as they reached the register to pay. A common greeting was, ”Good morning. Did you find everything you needed?” Her greetings lacked the personalized touch of the student workers from the earlier observation.

Sally Jo noted the impact of student workers in the library: “In the library the student employees are always really nice, and I think it’s because they understand. I don’t know where to look for stuff, so they’re always really nice.” Doug pointed out that student employees were plentiful and effective:

Not so much as TAs or anything like the big schools, but I mean even in the cafeteria they have students working there serving food. There are people working in the library, and they all know what they’re doing. They do a really good job at it. It seems like to me that all of the student employees have such a good level of training. It doesn’t really matter whether you’re working with faculty or a student employee. They always know what they’re talking about; they’re able to help you, and in the rare case that they can’t, they can find someone who’s always readily available for a quick response.
Jake summed up most of the participants’ views on the student worker’s impact on service when he said, “They relate to you better.” Observations supported the idea that Millennial students feel student workers can relate to their needs more. In each observation setting Millennial students often sought out the student worker over the older workers. During a bookstore observation, a Millennial student walked into the bookstore and was greeted by an older but friendly female worker. The female worker with salt and pepper hair and a bright blue Kirkwood bookstore t-shirt asked if the student needed help. The student declined and noted she was “just looking.” However, a few minutes passed and a younger student worker in a matching blue t-shirt walked by. The student stopped her to ask a question about the return policy.

Molly’s comments as a student employee also supported this theme:

I’m a student-employee, and I go here too, so it’s a little less frustrating. For example, people get uptight about things, and I totally understand because I’m going through the same things. Student employees need the income because they are college students, so I think it’s kind of a win-win situation. They need to work here as much as Kirkwood needs them to work here. I just think it’s better to have people that are involved already on campus helping out because they get to learn more about this school.

When asked to elaborate on why she believed student employees have a positive impact on the service experience, Molly added:

Sometimes I’ve heard people get frustrated when the adults are trying to help them that work there, and then when I go up I’ll say “Oh, you know, I have the exact same problem. Come back and check next week – you can come in and see
if we have it in yet.” They automatically calm down because they realize it’s not our fault, it’s just that the book’s not in or we didn’t have enough. They can relate to you better.

On the other hand, Angie was the one participant who had a less positive view of student employees:

I know they’re going to school too and they have long hours, but at times in the C-store you’d hear a bunch of personal information between the employees and you think “I could have gone all day without hearing that,” or there would be drama between some of the student employees. Maybe the managers could pay a little more attention and keep the personal stuff outside.

Angie recollected one specific instance in the college C-Store when she did not receive the service she expected from a service worker:

When I was in the convenience store, I grabbed a pop before I headed to class, and since it was the end of the day, the kids were trying to get out real fast and clean up. I had exactly $1.25 on the counter. I put the pop down and she was like, “All right, bye.” No “thanks”; she just took the money and said “Bye.” I felt like I was being rushed. I was the only one in there. It would have taken two minutes to just say, “Have a nice night.”

It is interesting to note that Angie was the only participant with a negative view of how student employees impacted the service provided at the college. It is possible that she related less to the other students because of her different life experiences both as a young single mom and as the oldest of the Millennial students who were interviewed for this study.
Positive or negative, student workers do impact the service experience on the Kirkwood Community College main campus.

**Theme Three: Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt**

The study participants have all attended Kirkwood Community College for at least one semester. The participant with the shortest experience at the college is Tanya, who had just finished her first semester when she was interviewed. The participant with the longest experience is Sally Jo, with two and a-half years on campus plus one Kirkwood class taught at her high school during her senior year. Regardless of the amount of schooling already completed, all participants’ responses reinforced the theme of Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt because it seems the service experience improves as a student learns the rules and norms of the college.

The Millennial students who participated in this study appeared to gain satisfaction with the service experience after they better understood the rules from past experience. Strange and Banning (2001) and Pace and Baird (1966) described this as the administrative press of the college environment. Strange and Banning (2001) also suggested that “examining collective personal perceptions of environment (from inside participants as well as outside observers) is critical for understanding how people are likely to react to those environments” (p. 86). The length of time students have attended Kirkwood Community College appears to add to their collective personal experience and influences the perception of their service experience.

Bob talked about the difference between his first experience in the advising and transfer center and his subsequent experience the next semester. “This semester was a lot easier, a lot more comfortable than last semester. I was more nervous last semester after
going in because it seemed like I needed to do a whole bunch of stuff. This year it’s a lot less.”

Sally Jo described her first trip to the college bookstore to purchase books: “I had no idea what to look for. Everybody was always very helpful; they always want to make sure you can find your books. It’s pretty easy to figure out after you realize how they’re organized.” While the process in the bookstore has become easier, her experience has also taught her that some things will always require assistance. “Finding the comp books – there are 50 bajillion comp books in that place and it is ridiculous trying to find them. Normally I need help with that.” She continued to ask for help after the first semester in certain cases.

Experienced students not only are more content but the participants of this study also indicated they were willing to share their expertise with new students. Angie shared how she has helped her sister by teaching her how to navigate Eagle Net, the student web portal. “My sister is actually starting next semester and she’ll call me with some of her questions and I tell her just to go to Eagle Net. Now click here without even looking because I already know it from just one and a half semester.” Evelyn also talked about helping a student with less familiarity with Kirkwood. “I helped my boyfriend figure out how to go to the advising center and what he needed to have ready so he could get in and out fairly quick,” explained Evelyn.

In one situation a young female student who looked like a Millennial generation student was shopping with an older woman who appeared to be her mother. They stopped a bookstore worker in her bright blue shirt to ask where the textbooks were located. The bookstore worker pointed the way but also took time to confirm that she was a new
student. The worker took the time to explain a new policy requiring the official college identification card, the Eagle Card, for purchasing books using financial aid. She also provided directions to the Eagle Card office and encouraged the new student to ask her co-workers in the textbook area to teach her how to find the correct books. The student and mother listened carefully to the directions but didn’t appear to completely understand what she needed to do next and why. When the bookstore worker walked away, the student mentioned to her mother, “Let’s go to that card office and we can ask about it there.” The lack familiarity with the bookstore, financial aid and Eagle Card appeared to slow their understanding of the directions offered by the bookstore worker. However, the information gained during that first visit to the bookstore will likely improve the student’s future visit further supporting Familiarity Leads to Contentment, not Contempt.

Due to the fact that the Eagle Card policy was newly implemented in January 2009, it was not familiar to even the experienced students which appeared to offer some mild irritation to some Millennial students who have previously purchased books using financial aid funds without presenting their Eagle Card. Some learned of the change via the posted signs (see Theme Four: The Writing is on The Wall) and some were told of the change when they reached the register to pay. One student noted, “I have used financial aid for two years and I always use my driver’s license for id. Why change what works?” before he headed to apartment to get his Eagle Card. In an effort to reduce his frustration with the policy change the employee offered to hold his books for him at the counter which he appreciated.

The Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt theme was noted in both interviews and observations. The familiarity was not always based on the length of time
a student has been at Kirkwood Community College because new policies, such as the change in Eagle Card policy in the bookstore, was unfamiliar even to experienced students.

*Theme Four: The Writing is on the Wall*

The importance of written cues such as posters, signs, and handouts was evident in both the observations and the interviews. Written communication, combined with other forms of communication, can impact the service experience.

Angie talked about the use of the bookstore receipt and poster to deliver key messages to students. “When I got my book receipt they circled on it when the last day to turn in books was going to be. That was very helpful.” Tanya also mentioned the receipt in her interview. “The return policy on the receipt is a great resource, since receipts should be kept. I think it is clear and understandable. There are also large signs posted behind the cashier matching the return policy on the receipt, so this is convenient when standing in line, making sure you understand returns.” Observations confirmed that this is standard practice in the check-out line during the week before classes.

Although Angie felt the use of the receipt to convey critical information was a positive use of written information to improve service experience, she also noted that over-reliance on the written word can have a negative impact as well.

The only thing that wasn't written in your face was the fact that you had, no matter what, to have your new Eagle Card to buy books. That is new since I've been here. My sister went with me so I could help her get her books. This is her first semester back in five years. We went through that long line; she had all the
paperwork printed off, and they told her that she had to have her Eagle Card. We noticed the sign when she was next in line.

Angie and her sister were not the only people who appeared to be surprised by the new requirement for the Eagle Card. During the observations, I noted six posters (see Appendix J) addressing the new Eagle Card requirement, but most students didn’t seem to notice the posters until they were already standing in line. The students who stopped to read the signs as they entered the store were predominantly older students or Millennial students who had a parent with them. Regardless of whether the signs were read before the student entered the line or after, many impacted students looked frustrated at the need to go to another building to get a college identification card prior to using financial aid to purchase books.

During the observation described earlier in Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt, the bookstore worker took time to determine if the student with her mother was new to Kirkwood Community College by asking her. When she answered yes, the worker pointed to the sign and explained the policy requiring an official student identification card, Eagle Card, to purchase books using financial aid. While the student asked, “Is there any way to get my card after my books because it is so cold out?” she accepted no for an answer, left the store, and returned 20 minutes later, presumably with an Eagle Card. The poster acted as a cue to remind the employee to acknowledge the policy and provided additional information to the student and her mother.

During an observation in the advising office a young male student with short hair, faded jeans, and a red hooded sweatshirt entered the office and looked around at the six other students sitting in chairs waiting for help. He approached the front desk, talked to
the receptionist, and signed in. He found a seat directly behind him to wait for his turn. After looking around, he appeared to notice a sign hanging up on the reception desk that encouraged students to use their wait time to consider class options before they saw the advisor. He jumped up and asked a question to the receptionist. She smiled and pointed to a stack of college class schedules.

With class schedule in hand, he returned to his seat and pulled out a pen. He flipped through the schedule and marked several pages during his 15-minute wait for an advisor. He followed the advisor into his office and re-appeared 20 minutes later looking content with the meeting. While the physical set up of the environment did not allow me to hear the instruction offered by the receptionist, more than one student appeared to notice the poster (see Appendix K) which faces most of the waiting area after sitting down, and many stood back up to retrieve a class schedule.

A couple of participants suggested the need for additional signage in the cafeteria. Bob suggested the signs for the deli sandwich area to reduce the need for the workers to ask for an order form. He explained, “For the subs you fill out a little form and if you don’t put the form on right away, they’ll ask you if you’re ready.” However, he noted, “It’s not too bad; it keeps the line moving and stuff.” Tanya commented, “They just kind of in intimidate me” when talking about the same experience.

Observations supported the confusion related to the cafeteria and no clear signage. On one day the sandwich line seemed to follow unspoken rules of completing an order slip and placing it on the top of the counter for the workers to grab and make the sandwich with very little conversation. Throughout the hour as people joined the line, they appeared to either know the accepted procedure or notice others in front of them and
then simply mimick them. Near the end of the hour when the lunch traffic had slowed, a mature man, wearing a badge from a meeting probably being held on campus, entered the sandwich line and attempted to order a sandwich verbally. The sandwich worker instructed him to complete a form. While he was not a Millennial and he didn’t seem unsatisfied, the exchange could have been experienced differently by different individuals.

The removal of information about the point system for the meal plan on signage had a negative impact on Sally Jo’s service experience in Sammy’s Café:

With the cafeteria, I got a meal plan. I asked somebody and they were like “Well, you get four items,” so I got two sandwiches because I was going to keep them for later, and they told me I couldn’t do that because it was two entrees. You can get one entree and three sides. That was the first time. I didn’t know what to do, and they used to put points after how many points a meal was worth because sometimes if you get like breaded chicken and potatoes, that’s going to be two of your meal points because the chicken counts as one, and then potatoes count as another. But sometimes they’ve had other stuff, like if you got chicken tacos, but it came with beans and rice and that was only one point. Its like, how am I supposed to figure that out? They don’t write that anymore.

Finally, observations in the financial aid department supported the theme; The Writing is on the Wall. The financial aid department is located beside enrollment services and the cashier, creating what is called the One Stop center. Upon entering the second floor of Kirkwood Hall, students see a room filled with natural light and warm wood tones and soft seating. During the first week of classes during one observation, students
were also greeted by numerous other students waiting to see financial aid staff. The effective use of signage alleviated the confusion caused by large numbers of students waiting for staff assistance. Students were greeted by a bright blue One Stop logo that is almost three feet in diameter and projected on the floor. Not only does the logo welcome students and visitors to the space, it also draws the eye to the floor to notice the bright blue plastic foot prints that directs them to the check-in computer. After checking in, students and visitors can be seated to wait their turn.

The Writing is on the Wall theme indicates the importance of written communication within the environment where service experiences happen. These forms of communication become important parts of the constructed environments.

Over all, the interviews and observations provided rich, thick descriptions and field notes offered support to the four major themes including Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality; Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Levels; Theme Three: Familiarity Breeds Contentment, not Contempt; Theme Four: The Writing is on the Wall.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how Millennial generation students experience the services they receive in the community college setting at Kirkwood Community College, a comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa. This chapter provides a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the study. It also addresses limitations, reflexivity of the researcher, and recommendations for practice and future research.

The conclusions are presented within the context of the research questions. The over-arching research question for this study was: How do Millennial generation students describe their experiences with service staff on a campus at Kirkwood Community College, a comprehensive community college in a suburban setting in eastern Iowa? Secondary research questions for the topic included:

- How widely do Millennial generation students describe themselves as customers of the community college?
- How can the characteristics of the Millennial generation help community colleges understand the relationship between the Millennial students and the community college service staff?
- How can community colleges use this research to develop professional development activities for service staff in the community college setting?
Conclusions

The answer to the first question was consistent among all participants. The Millennial generation participants who were interviewed for this study described their experiences in a positive light. Overall, they were very satisfied with how they were treated and with the service they have received. Considering the theoretical framework for this study, the participants seemed to agree that the constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2001) is positive and provides for a good service experience. The evidence for this finding is captured in the three of the four major themes of the study: Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality, Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Experiences, and Theme Three: Familiarity Leads to Contentment, not Contempt. The positive service experiences left an impression on the participants. Even when less than positive experiences were discussed, the participants usually shared a reason that the lesser service was justified or easily explained. The sub-theme, What Could I Expect?, highlighted this phenomena.

A related phenomenon was noted by Godwin and Markham (1996), but the generation they studied, who were most likely Generation X students, didn’t have the same positive outlook on it. “Freshmen usually accepted the campus bureaucracy as ‘just the way things are,’ elected to cooperate with it, and rarely challenged it overtly” (p. 681). But this earlier study of bureaucracy on a college campus, which influences the service experience, noted that student “compliance was often somewhat grudging, and at times they were irritated and frustrated by their powerlessness and the campus bureaucracy’s requirements and dysfunctions” (p. 681). This leaves one to wonder if the change is solely in the student press (Strange & Banning, 2001) indicating the findings of
this study show a distinct generational shift in student reactions to the similar service situations on a college campus. Other possible explanations could include a shift in the administrative press on campuses that reduced the bureaucracy or the difference caused by the research occurring at a different point in history could have impacted the perception of the constructed environment.

Answering the question, “How widely do Millennial generation students describe themselves as customers of the community college?” is complicated. Students as Customers? was a sub-theme within Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality and provides guidance to answer this question. Only one of the eight participants used the word “customer” without a prompt, so it is important to note it is not a descriptive word that naturally fits the students’ perceptions or their vocabulary.

With a prompt, which was a follow-up question that used the term customer at the end of the final interview, the majority of the participants believed the term customer described their out-of-the-classroom experiences but not the full community college experience. Thus the use of the term customer on the community college campus was not widely used, and when it was used it was usually qualified by the participants to exclude classroom experiences. This finding appears to confirm the statement by Delucchi and Korgen (2002) that out-of-the-classroom experiences may have a customer aspect that does not apply in the classroom. This fits with Scott’s (1999) assertion that secondary measures, such as handling phone calls, are often critical to the service experience on campuses and other professional settings.

A wide variety of characteristics of the Millennial generation did not seem to offer much insight into the themes in relation to answering, “How can the characteristics
of the Millennial generation help the community colleges understand the relationship between the Millennial students and the community college service staff?” The only one of the seven core traits of Millennial generation members presented by Howe and Strauss (2007) that ties to the identified theme is Conventional.

The Conventional core trait notes that “Millennials provide a modern twist to the traditional belief that social rules and standards can make life easier” (p.59). This twist could help explain why Millennials were so willing to find a reasonable excuse for less than satisfying service, as noted in Theme One: Expectations Equal Reality. The idea of 24/7 expectations due to their long standing exposure to technology and the Internet (Obling & Obling 2005) didn’t appear to raise expectations for services at all times of the day; rather, it made the participating Millennials appreciate what was available online for 24/7 service. This confirms Lowery’s (2004) suggestion that colleges should continue to expand the use of technology to meet student needs.

This research can help community colleges better understand how to meet the expectations of the Millennial generation students related to service experiences on campuses. This greater understanding can be used to inform professional development activities for community college employees to increase student satisfaction, as suggested by Black (1995). Professional development activities should acknowledge the importance of student expectations related to the service experience. Equally important, community college staff professional development programs should consider drawing the distinction between classroom experiences and those interactions with community college personnel that happen outside the classroom. In the recommendations section that follows later, the
Theme Two: Student Workers Impact Service Levels will be used to inform some professional development recommendations.

Implications

It is important to understand how perceiving students as customers could shift expectations, however, it is hard to know whether the implications would be positive or negative. As noted in theme one, expectations are an important concept. Once the word “customer” was introduced into the conversation, the tone shifted slightly. If a college were to perceive students as customers during their service experiences, it could influence service staff to provide better customer service and serve as a reminder to staff that students outside the classroom deserve a high quality of service throughout the departments on campus. However, it could also influence students to shift to a more consumer driven mind set.

The conversation about students as customers is making its way onto college campuses, as recently evidenced on the front page of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. “Lots of colleges treat students like customers. But how many have an ice cream truck? And valet parking? And a concierge desk?” (Bartlett, p.1, 2008). The article is talking about High Point University in North Carolina. In addition to sharing the many amenities newly offered by High Point, the article notes “some seniors and recent graduates complain that the new students are lazy and feel entitled” (Bartlett, p.5, 2008), possibly a sign of changing expectations based on the customer relationship.

This introduction of the term could introduce a new perspective, as noted by Strange and Banning (2001) when discussing the “nature of human relationship” (p. 103). Using the term customers to identify students could change “the shared assumptions that
define what is the ultimate right way for people to relate to each other” on a community college campus (p. 103). Thus the implications of using the term to describe students should be seriously considered before adopting it for regular use on the community college campus.

“Customer service is simply fulfilling the real expectations of students – ‘expectations.’ Not wants. Not desires, but ‘expectations’” (Raisman, 2002, p.17). Expectations are a common theme in this study and it has implications. Participants agreed that they found Kirkwood Community College employees to be nice, and they enjoyed interacting with them. This expectation sets the bar and places emphasis on meeting that expectation with each service experience. Professional development activities that cut across departments could help ensure that the high standard of service set in one department is met in all departments on the community college campus.

**Limitations**

One distinct limitation of the study was the difficulty of participants’ remembering past interactions with college services personnel. Many participants took a great deal of time to recall, and some struggled with specific details about past service experiences.

While it is not a major concern, it is also possible that the voluntary nature of the study may have encouraged students with extreme experiences, either positive or negative, to self-identify for the study. The interviews do not indicate this, but it is not possible to confirm or deny this tentative limitation.

Another possible limitation is the impact I, as a researcher and senior level administrator at the college, had on the participant during the interview. The notion of my
impact on the interview with participants is addressed in the reflexivity section. This limitation also applies to the observations because my presence could impact employee actions. I was able to minimize this limitation by not announcing within departments my intent to observe. The timing of the observations helped because employees were often extremely busy and didn’t notice me for long periods of time. The timing also helped because I am typically very visible during the start of a semester when services are the busiest, so if I was noticed in an area it would not be a considered out of the normal operating standards for me to be there.

**Reflexivity**

As I reflect on my research, I am aware I was constantly checking my assumptions and bracketing my preconceived notions. The bracketing was not easy but it was extremely necessary because my life experiences led me to select this topic because of personal interest.

First, my experience as a first generation college student left me with vivid memories of poor service in the financial aid office of a community college that caused my family to decline to complete financial aid paperwork which surely would have resulted in me receiving financial aid. Much later in life as the Vice President of Enrollment at Kirkwood Community College, I increased my awareness of the level and quality of service while dealing with non-instructional escalated student complaints. I see situations in which a slightly different staff response could improve the student experience. These two life experiences caused me to narrow my topic to Millennial generation (traditional age students coming to the community college, just like I did) and the service experience.
In hindsight I realize that narrowing the study to Millennials likely caused me to miss some rich experiences. During my observations I discovered more frustration in students who appeared to be Generation X students. I would imagine participant interviews with this generational group would have sounded differently. For these reasons, I suggest future research on preceding generations who are still on our campuses. I regret not having to chance to hear the stories myself and may do some informal research to gain their perspective.

The observations also allowed me to understand how much we do not see in our everyday lives. I consider myself to be one of the most accessible vice presidents on campus and pride myself in the time I spend in our service departments interacting with staff and students, especially during busy times of the semester. This semester I continued my regular visits to key areas in addition to my formal observations for the study. When I started to analyze my field notes I was surprised how the change we made to our Eagle Card policy on the bookstore kept surfacing. It really had an impact on the service experience and I believe I would have missed it if I hadn’t done formal observations with field notes followed by analysis. It caused me to rethink how I will spend my time in the future when I am observing our service settings.

My final reflection is related to my role as research and senior administrator. My committee members and I had discussed how my position might influence the answers I received from the participants. After the interviews were complete, I asked participants if my perceived position at the college influenced their answers. The position was perceived because I purposefully didn’t give students my business cards or share my title, but several came into my office area which is in the presidential suite. They uniformly said it
didn’t impact their answers and most were surprised to hear I was a vice president. I was glad that the participants, possibly representative of the Millennial generation in general, were willing to speak their mind and be honest with a college administrator.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The recommendations for practice will be presented by theme. However as noted, several of the recommendations are grounded in findings from a variety of the four major themes which were: Expectations Equal Reality (Theme One); Student Workers Impact Service Levels (Theme Two); Familiarity Leads to Contentment, no Contempt (Theme Three); and The Writing is on the Wall (Theme Four).

The recommendations for theme one are related to better understanding the constructed environment on the community college campus. Each campus is a unique environment; the students as well as their expectations have a tremendous impact on that environment. This indicates a need to understand student expectations. This understanding could be gained through additional research. Once the expectations are understood, the community college might choose to manage those expectations through better communication about policies and practices. An example of managing expectations may be educating students about the required time needed to process federal financial aid if their expectations are unrealistic.

In addition to managing expectations, it would be recommended to ensure service staff actually understands student expectations. Professional development activities should be planned to inform staff of student expectations and to development service expectations based on those reasonable student expectations. Professional development activities should clearly differentiate between the instructional environment within the
classroom and the service environment in areas such as the cafeteria, financial aid and the college bookstore. Services staff must understand that students expect to be treated differently in these two different settings.

The recommendations based on the learning from theme two, which was Student Workers Impact Service Levels, involve hiring the best student for service-related jobs as well as providing quality training to student workers. Based on the findings, it is clear that student workers have a unique role to play in the service experience for Millennial generation students on the community college campus.

The first recommendation for theme two is to ensure those who hire student workers understand the impact they have and therefore take the time to hire the student who can provide the best service possible. The hiring of a student worker should not be a managerial after thought with little or no time devoted to finding the right candidate for the position.

The second recommendation is to provide consistent, quality professional development opportunities to the student workers to maximize the quality of their service work. This professional development should focus on providing the student worker with a broad base of knowledge to ensure they perform the functions of their given job to the best of their ability but should also include some general knowledge to address frequently asked questions from students. The final recommendation related to theme two also stems from the earlier expectations theme. Student workers must understand their fellow students’ expectations and the positive impact they can have on the service experiences on the campus.
Theme three stresses the importance of familiarity as it relates to contentment in Millennial students. It is recommended that community colleges place more of an emphasis on communicating information to students. Due to the diverse nature of community college student populations a variety of means including web, first-year experience classes, marketing materials and orientations should be considered. In the specific case of Kirkwood Community College, an increased emphasis on orientation for all first-time full time students (which are predominantly Millennial generation students) is a critical recommendation because currently only a small percentage attend orientation sessions that could provide some critical familiarity prior to students even starting classes each year.

The theme four recommendations relate to the previous topic of familiarity. The Writing is on the Wall theme indicates that visual message in and around service departments can improve the service experience by providing critical information or subtle cues to students. The messages displayed in service areas should be easy to understand and deliberate.

**Future Research**

As discussed earlier, this is a new field of inquiry and there is not a great deal of existing literature on the topic. Because of this, the avenues for future research are varied and plentiful including several options with the generational theme.

First, this study does not indicate a strong sense of absolute consumerism in the Millennial students. Some observations indicate that there may be a difference between Millennial students and those of both their Millennial parents’ attitudes and those of non-traditional age students such as Generation X and Baby Boomer students who may be
coming to community college campuses in search of retraining. During one observation in the advising and transfer center, a male Millennial age student and his father walked into the office and approached the counter to sign up to see an academic advisor. After a brief conversation with the receptionist, the student took a seat to wait while the father left the office with a dissatisfied look on his face and found a chair in the outer seating area. He proceeded to make a call to indicate he would be late because he was “stuck at Kirkwood.” One wonders if it is the much publicized helicopter parent who brings a consumerist mindset to the community college campus rather than their Millennial children. Additional research could shed light on the topic and provide a basis for addressing the related issues to helicopter parents.

As noted in my reflexivity, I considered how my professional position as Vice President of Enrollment might influence my opinions on the topic. I reflected on past escalated complaints and noticed a previously unnoticed trend that service-related escalated complaints tend to be from older students. Future research could include an identical study to this one delimited to Generation X students or even Baby Boomer students.

Second, additional research opportunities remain related to the service experience on the community college campus. Because memory of the participants was a limitation of this study, future research could be conducted with a more immediate follow up after the service experience. This might be a quantitative study based on a questionnaire administered immediately or a qualitative study with interviews conducted in a real time setting.
Due to the delimitation of the study focusing on pre-transfer and liberal arts students, additional research would be needed to understand the implication of service on students in career and applied science programs.

Another area of research that could be expanded upon is the idea of expectations being reality. A future study could be designed to better capture student expectations of the service environment and match their perception and satisfaction to the previously documented expectation. If a student expects to wait in line for assistance with financial aid is the wait tolerated better than if they expect immediate service?

Finally, the impact of customer service training on a campus or within departments could be studied to better understand why employees provide the service they do. The study could explore if employees perceive that they have the necessary tools and skills to meet the students’ needs.
REFERENCES


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Debard, R. (2004). Millennials coming to college. New Directions for Student Services, 106(Summer), 33-44.


Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristie Fisher was born December, 28 1970 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She received her Associate of Arts degree from Kirkwood Community College in December 1990 and her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Iowa in May 1992. Kristie earned her Master of Business Administration from the Henry B. Tippie School of Business at the University of Iowa. In addition to working in a k-12 education system for four years, she has served in a variety of roles at Kirkwood Community College currently serving as Vice President of Enrollment.
APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

First Interview

a. Background Questions
   i. What is your name?
   ii. What is your email address?
   iii. What is your phone number?
   iv. How would you prefer I contact you?
   v. How old are you? In what year were you born?
   vi. What is your major?
   vii. When did you start attending this community college?
   viii. Have you attended any other colleges?
   ix. Tell me about yourself.

b. Topic Specifics Questions
   i. Tell me about your service experiences at Kirkwood.
   ii. What departments have you interacted with on campus?
   iii. Could you describe your interactions with these departments? (If needed, add; tell me about the service you experienced.)
   iv. In your experience, have the service interactions differed between in-class and out-of-class experiences?
   v. Do your service expectations differ between in class experiences and out of class experiences?
   vi. When considering the out of class experience, I would like to hear your experiences and opinion on the following topics:
      1. Service hours
      2. Web accessibility
      3. College employees
      4. Overall satisfaction
   vii. How have your service experiences impacted your relationship with the college?
   viii. Based on your experience, are there areas of the college that could benefit from being more consumer friendly? Which departments and why?
   ix. In your opinion, what does your tuition payment entitle you to?

Second Interview

a. Did you have an opportunity to review your transcript I sent to you?
b. Did any other experiences or thoughts occur to you after reviewing the transcript?
   a. Follow up based on comments.
c. Were there any inaccuracies in the transcript?
d. Did you have an opportunity to review the document labeled “Emerging Themes” I sent to you?
e. Did the themes represent the experiences you shared? Tell me why you feel this way?
   a. Discuss each theme in detail.
f. Is there anything else about your service experiences at Kirkwood that you would like to add?
## APPENDIX B: TIMELINE

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<td>IRB Approval</td>
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<td>Participant Recruitment and Selection</td>
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<td>Participant Interviews</td>
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### BUDGET

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APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Millennial Generation Service Experiences in the Community College Setting

Investigators: Kristie Fisher (BA, MBA)

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how Millennial generation students experience service in the community college setting at a large Midwestern comprehensive community college in a suburban setting. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a Millennial generation student at Kirkwood Community College.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately two months. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed:

- You will be interviewed two times. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes and consist of a number of open-ended questions.
- You will be assigned a pseudonym in all written records.
• I will tape record our interview. Your name will not be included on the tape recordings and said recordings will be erased at the completion of the research project.

• You will be asked to review the transcript of the first interview and a report of emerging themes, as well as any other instances where you are portrayed prior to the second interview.

• The final report will be published in a dissertation through the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Iowa State University and may inform additional studies to be conducted at this community college.

• Kirkwood Community College may be identified in the dissertation but participants will not be identified.

• At any point during the interview process you may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you uncomfortable. You may also end the interview at any point, no questions asked.

RISKS

Risk in this study is minimal. However, there is a slight chance that you may feel uncomfortable talking about personal experiences. You will be asked your candid opinions about your experiences at Kirkwood. Your name, title, and identifying characteristics will not be linked to your comments. Kirkwood Community College may be identified in the dissertation.

BENEFITS
If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. Indirect benefits of this study are (1) provide insight into your generation (2) to guide future training for community college employees and (3) increase the level of satisfaction with customer service.

**COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated for participating in this study. The rates will be $15 Casey’s General Store Gift Card gift card after the interview and $15 Casey’s General Store gift card after the second interview.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: You will be assigned a pseudonym in all written records. Your name will not be included on the tape recordings and said recordings will be erased at the
completion of the research project. I will be the sole person who will have access to study records. They will be kept on a personal computer in my home office which is password protected at all times. Written files will be destroyed as soon as legally possible. All interviews will be held in a private room and transcripts will be returned to you per your wishes either via email or given directly to you in a sealed envelope. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

**QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

For further information about the study contact Kristie Fisher at 319-398-4977 or by email at kfisher@kirkwood.edu. To speak to the supervising faculty member contact Dr. Larry Ebbers at 515-294-8067 or by email at lebbers@iastate.edu.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

********************************************************************************

**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study. Participant’s Name (printed) 

*******************************************************************************
INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

________________________________________ _______________
(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent) (Date)
APPENDIX E:
IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

DATE: September 18, 2008
TO: Kristie L. Fisher
1432 Hickory Hollow Rd. NE, Solon, IA 52333
CC: Dr. Larry Ebbers
N226 Lagomarcino
FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
Office of Research Assurances
TITLE: Millennial Generation Service Experiences in the Community College Setting
IRB ID: 08-341 Study Review Date: 18 September 2008

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair has reviewed this project and has declared the study exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b). The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.

- You must carry out the research as proposed in the IRB application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if you have stated in your application that you will do so or if required by the IRB.

- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB on a Continuing Review and/or Modification form, prior to making any changes, to determine if the project still meets the Federal criteria for exemption. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an IRB proposal will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please be sure to **use the documents with the IRB approval stamp** in your research.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. **Only the IRB may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.
APPENDIX F: INSTITUTIONAL APPROVAL LETTER

To: ISU Doctoral Committee for Kristie Fisher

From: Mick Starcevich, President, Kirkwood Community College

Date: July 20, 2008

RE: Dissertation Research Approval

The memo documents my approval of Kristie Fisher’s research related to “Student as Customer.” She is approved to recruit and interview student participants at Kirkwood Community College. She is also approved to collect documents for analysis. All related research activities are also approved.
APPENDIX G:
REVISED INSTITUTIONAL APPROVAL LETTER

To: ISU Doctoral Committee for Kristie Fisher
From: Mick Starcevich, President, Kirkwood Community College
Date: September 1, 2008
RE: Dissertation Research Approval

This memo documents my approval of Kristie Fisher’s research related to “Student as Customer.” She is approved to add observations to her research approved on July 20, 2008.
APPENDIX H:
RECRUITMENT POSTER/FLYER

Talk about Your Service Experience at Kirkwood

A research study is being conducted at Kirkwood Community College by an Iowa State doctoral student and participants are needed.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how Millennial generation students experience service in the community college setting at a large Midwestern comprehensive community college in a suburban setting.

Are you:
A Millennial age student (those born after 1982)
At least 18 years of age
Have you completed at least one semester at Kirkwood
Liberal arts major.

If you can answer yes to these questions and are willing to participate (approximately two hours total commitment), please contact Kristie Fisher at kfisher@kirkwood.edu.

Compensation is available.

__________________________________________________________________

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
 Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may leave the study at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY
 Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: You will be assigned a pseudonym in all written records. Your name will not be included on the tape recordings and said recordings will be erased at the completion of the research project. The researcher will be the sole person who will have access to study records. They will be kept on a personal computer in my home office which is password protected at all times. Written files will be destroyed as soon as legally possible. All interviews will be held in a private room and transcripts will be returned to you per your wishes either via email or given directly to you in a sealed envelope. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.
APPENDIX I:
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECEIPT FORM

Iowa State University
Research Participant Receipt Form (RPRF)
Use if this payment is less than $75

Iowa State University (ISU) is required to maintain the confidentiality of information about research study participants while still complying with recordkeeping requirements of the State of Iowa, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and funding agencies. The purpose of this form is to serve as documentation of the receipt of compensation associated with participation in a research study conducted by ISU personnel.

I, ________________________________, have received/or am requesting compensation in the form and amount indicated below:

☐ Cash $___________
☐ Check $___________
☐ Gift Certificate/Card $___________
☐ Other Property – Describe: __________________________________________

Value: $___________

_________________________ _______________________
Research Participant Signature Date

TO ISU PERSONNEL:
Research participants may be given the opportunity to participate without receiving payment if they choose not to complete this receipt form.

This form provides documentation for gift certificates/cards or other property purchased by ISU p-card—keep original form as part of your p-card documentation.

If an ISU check needs to be issued for payment, attach RPRF to completed honoraria voucher and submit to Accounting, 3000 AOB.
APPENDIX J:
EAGLE CARD POSTER

EAGLE CARD

Gotta have it to

- buy books at the bookstore
- register for classes
- get into the Rec Center
- get into Kirkwood events
- check out books at the library
- change your name or address
- get a copy of your transcript, schedule or bill
- change your EagleNet password

TUITION DUE
the Friday before classes start

KIRKWOOD ALERT
go to www.kirkwood.edu/alert
Welcome to the Advising Center. Please use your wait time to review the course schedule for classes you are considering.
To: Kristie Fisher
From: Mick Starcevich, President
Date: March 2009
RE: Permission to Use Kirkwood College Name

Please accept this memo as documentation of permission to use the Kirkwood Community College name in your dissertation studying service experience of community college students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is hard to know where to begin in expressing my gratitude as I complete my doctoral studies. I will start with my major professor, Dr. Larry Ebbers. Dr. Ebbers is more than a major professor; he was my recruiter when he encouraged me to look at the program while I was participating in CLIC and finishing my MBA at the University of Iowa. He was my travel guide and key advisor while I learned to navigate the sometimes turbulent waters at Iowa State and in the ELPS program. I thank him for the great advice about picking a topic you care about and sticking with it. I am often glad that I took his advice to start my literature review in my first semester and work on it each semester. Finally, he was the one who kept me focused on the completion of the degree and future possibilities.

While I did not officially have a co-major professor, Dr. Frankie Santos-Laanan served in the capacity in many ways. He provided me with an additional lens through which I could view issues, concerns and opportunities. Dr. Santos-Laanan was a challenging instructor who found ways to support each student in their own personal areas of interest. He was the first person who opened up the possibilities for my future and his encouragement has caused me to seriously consider pursuing a presidency outside of the state of Iowa at a later point in my career. I also thank Dr. Santos-Laanan for his love of academia and the passion he shared with us. I will never forget the day he brought his doctoral gown to the class to inspire us; little did he know that it was the look on his face that inspired us, not the beautiful blue gown. He balanced perfectly for the community college cohort by focusing on creating scholarly practitioners, which helped me find my place on the floor.
Dr. Robyn Cooper, hands down, is the best faculty member with whom I have ever had the pleasure to take a class. She taught qualitative research with passion but was always able to provide an honest and fair comparison to the quantitative approach. Dr. Cooper took the time to ensure each student was gaining understanding. She also masterfully adapted her teaching style to accommodate the students and the material. Watching her teach inspired me to teach in a more productive and interesting style. In addition to the classroom experience, she offered timely and helpful advice on both my capstone and this dissertation.

After determining I would use a qualitative approach in my dissertation, I asked Dr. Lori Patton to join my committee. It was a wonderful opportunity to work with a faculty member who was not directly connected to the community college cohort. When I was feeling lost in my writing I often pulled Dr. Patton’s dissertation out of my files and read a section. While I appreciate her service on my committee, I will forever appreciate her “miracle work” on my purpose statement. At my proposal meeting my committee members and I were struggling with a better way to express my purpose statement. Many ideas were floated but none seemed right until Dr. Patton thoughtfully offered a suggestion that made everyone nod their heads in agreement.

When I asked Margaret Torrie to serve as my committee member outside the department, she was not only accepted, she looked for ways to bring value to my work immediately. When I shared my thoughts about studying consumerism or customer service in higher education, she excitedly talked about options and different perspectives. Her input helped guide both my capstone and my dissertation.
Then there is Judy. Judy Wieland has helped numerous doctoral students track down paperwork, available rooms, and faculty members. She served as a wonderful surrogate when I could not be in Ames but needed to get something done. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the librarians at both Iowa State and Kirkwood. They helped me track down hard-to-find articles and offered valuable advice. Special thanks to my editor, Suzanne Kelsey, and my transcriptionist, Alissa King.

Kirkwood is not only the site for my dissertation research, it is also the institution that supported my doctoral studies by offering flexibility, access, and tuition support. Our president, Mick Starcevich was a key supporter who always helped me keep the work in perspective.

One does not attempt to work full-time and earn a doctoral degree without knowing they have the full support of both family and friends. First my friends who helped make this a reality. Dee Baird, a colleague and friend, was instrumental in connecting me with Dr. Larry Ebbers and a terrific role model for balancing it all. She was also the friend who answered countless questions and provided that “I’ve been there, sister” advice. It was with great envy that I watched her finish her dissertation a short year ago and I am anxious to join her ranks as alumni of Iowa State.

There are always those people in our lives who we consider our partners in crime. I was lucky enough to find two such partners in the community college cohort: Jeff Rabey and Anne Howsare. Jeff and Anne, like me, were University of Iowa transplants on “enemy” soil. Jeff and Anne made classes fun and worth the two hour drive. I will miss eating the fabulous grilled cheese panini in the coffee shop with them and seeing them each month in Ames.
Many other friends made my doctoral work possible in so many different ways. Ann Carter was the first to offer to help out with my kids and to lighten my work at home. She was also my Cyclone tutor as I acclimated to Ames. Wendy Lingo, a fellow doctoral student and a Kirkwood colleague, commiserated with me on more than one occasion. Jodi Valenta, Abby Bowman and Julie Lins, who always seemed to know when to ask about my progress and when to avoid the topic, were always patient when I passed on invitations to do something fun in order to attend class, read, or write.

Finally the people who deserve the most thanks and appreciation are my family members. First, thank you to my parents who worked hard to put me through my undergraduate years as a first generation college student and continued to support my decision to obtain both my masters and now my doctorate. Their help around the house and with my children was invaluable.

Second, thank you to my sister, who made an emergency trip from Albuquerque to help manage my life for a week in January so I could focus on my dissertation in the middle of catastrophic medical issues in my family and state-wide budget cuts at work. The week she came was critical to the completion of the dissertation and my sanity.

Third, I thank my daughters, Kennedy and Taylor, who have never known their mother not to be in school or working on homework. Because I moved straight from my MBA program into the doctoral program at Iowa State, they have been asked to understand when I had to miss a music performance or a sock hop to attend class. They have also understood when I locked myself away for days at a time to complete an assignment, read, or work on this dissertation. They know far more about dissertations than the average nine and eleven year-olds. They are definitely my biggest fans and I
hope my example encourages them to seek advanced degrees when they have the opportunity.

Finally, my husband, Drew who attended the music performances and sock hops with the girls (usually with a smile). I thank him for supporting my desire to continue my education even though he openly acknowledged he just didn’t get why anyone would want go back to school while working. I know there were nights when weeping daughters yearned for their mom and he was the person wiping the tears. I sincerely look forward to being at home more and having more free time to spend with Drew, Kennedy and Taylor.