

The Spa Analogy

Terry O'Banion

We are student centered, and we are teaching centered, and these are great strengths we should never abandon. There is room, however, for us also to be more learning centered. Let me illustrate the differences:

A client (student, customer, learner) decides to go to an expensive spa for a week to lose five pounds (behavioral objective, learning outcome, exit competency). The client is treated exceedingly well in keeping with the \$5,000 paid for the week. The spa is very student centered: All the staff greet the client by his first name which is embroidered on a luxurious terry cloth robe. His room includes all the amenities with a refrigerator well stocked with Perrier. Soft music plays in the background, and he is awakened each morning with recorded sounds of birds trilling in the meadow. He is introduced as one of the family to staff members, and he is soon engaged in meaningful dialogue about organic carrots with the other customers over a beautiful presentation of spa cuisine. There is no need for retention committees here.

The spa is also very teaching centered: There is one staff member for every 3 clients. They all have advanced degrees in such areas as aromatherapy, organic nutrition, meditation, and tantric massage. Their degrees and awards are posted on workout room walls, and there is a special spot that recognizes those who have received teaching excellence awards. In addition, all staff are buffed, tanned, and beautiful—models of what our students would like to become.

At the end of the week the client (student, customer, learner) packs to leave the spa, and as a final act of self assessment, steps on the scale in his well-appointed bathroom. To his dismay not one pound has been lost. In spite of the spa's learner-centered and teaching-centered philosophy and practice, the learning-centered goal of losing 5 pounds did not receive the same attention—and the student leaves the spa with the feeling that he has been cheated.

It is not enough to make students feel good about the environment on the campus or the services they receive. It is not enough to impress students with the dazzling performance of great lecturers or with lists of publications from leading scholars. It is not enough to provide all the latest bells and whistles in information technology. It is not enough to make

education convenient. If we cannot document improved and expanded learning—however defined and however measured—we cannot say with any assurance that we have made a substantive difference in the lives of our students.

Terry O'Banion
obanion@league.org