

Analysis of Service Quality Gaps and Improvement Strategies in Undergraduate-Related Departments at Universities Based on the SERVQUAL Model

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Abstract: With the continuous development of higher education, "moral education" has become the core task of university education. To better achieve this goal, the service quality of undergraduate-related departments (Undergraduate Offices) at universities is crucial. This paper uses the SERVQUAL model to deeply analyze the service quality of undergraduate offices, aiming to identify and reduce the expectation gaps between service providers and recipients. Through a literature review and model analysis, this paper explores the cognition gap, standards gap, delivery gap, communication gap, and quality gap, and proposes corresponding improvement strategies. The research results indicate that by enhancing communication, clarifying service standards, improving execution, and utilizing information technology, the service quality of undergraduate offices can be effectively improved. Finally, this paper presents future research directions and practical applications, emphasizing the importance of continuous improvement and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: SERVQUAL model; higher education; undergraduate work; service management.

Introduction

"Moral education" is the foundation of universities and the fundamental task of education. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly pointed out: "Fully implement the Party's educational policy, and fulfill the fundamental task of moral education to cultivate socialist builders and successors with an all-round development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education" [1]. To better promote the realization of this task and create a new chapter in the development of China's education sector, various departments within universities need to improve their service quality and better serve faculty and students. In most "Double First-Class" universities, undergraduate-related work is often handled by one or more departments, which take on responsibilities such as ideological and political education, student affairs management, academic support, mental health counseling, and career development planning. Together, these departments form an essential part of the university's service management system.

These departments (hereinafter referred to as Undergraduate Offices) are typically led by a Party and administrative leader, generally the deputy secretary of the Party committee of the academic unit, with key figures including the department director, deputy director, and others. They not only play the role of administrators but also serve as important service nodes for faculty and students. Numerous practices have shown that improving service quality is not only related to students' growth and development but is also a direct reflection of the overall quality of university education. However, there is often an expectation gap between service providers and recipients [2], and if these gaps are not identified and addressed, they will directly affect service effectiveness and educational quality.

1. Model Introduction

The service quality management system aims to eliminate service quality gaps and is based on the SERVQUAL model, which was introduced in the mid-1980s to early 1990s by American marketing scholars A. Parasuraman, Valarie A. Zeithamal, and Leonard L. Berry. The SERVQUAL model is specifically designed to analyze the root causes of quality problems in services [3].

This model focuses on Gap 5, which represents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of the service. This is the most fundamental gap that departments or organizations need to

address. According to the 5 Gap model, Gap 5 arises from the interaction of four other gaps, and to bridge this key gap, addressing the four preceding gaps is essential. These gaps include:

Gap 1: The difference between management's perception of customer expectations and actual customer expectations.

Gap 2: The difference between the quality standards set by management and their understanding of customer expectations.

Gap 3: The difference between quality standards and actual implementation.

Gap 4: The gap between actual service delivery and communication to customers.

This paper will use the example of university undergraduate offices to analyze these gaps and propose potential strategies for improvement.

2. Model Analysis

In the context of undergraduate offices, the "customers" are the faculty and students who require services, and the "managers" include the deputy secretary responsible for the undergraduate office, the director in charge of specific tasks, and assistants such as counselors and academic secretaries. With this premise, the 5 Gap model can be tailored to this specific scenario.

2.1 The Cognitive Gap

Gap 1 represents the difference between what the managers of the undergraduate office perceive faculty and students expect and what these groups actually expect. Managers often face a dynamic group of young individuals with high levels of mobility and active minds, making it unrealistic for office leaders to have a clear understanding of their expectations. Common misunderstandings among counselors and academic secretaries include:

Underestimating the depth and scope of students' needs for life assistance, such as requests for late-night hospital visits or processing administrative tasks during weekends or holidays.

Failing to understand academic support needs, such as requests to modify transcripts or remove failing grades.

Overlooking students' demand for personalized services, such as customized career planning or psychological counseling.

These cognitive gaps, though prevalent, are often ignored by managers who rely on experience to perform their duties. Therefore, it is necessary for office managers to establish direct communication channels and provide clear guidelines, repeatedly explaining the underlying rules to students and faculty. Measures such as setting up direct communication inboxes can encourage students and faculty to submit their service needs or current issues to managers, who can then review and address them after necessary filtering.

2.2 The Standards Gap

Gap 2 focuses on whether the service standards set by managers accurately reflect their understanding of what students and faculty expect. As previously mentioned, managers may have an incomplete understanding of service expectations, and when creating policies or service processes, they might also deviate from their perception of these expectations. For instance, when allocating graduate recommendation quotas, students expect a fair and transparent process based on academic merit, and suggestions during feedback meetings may call for more weight on research achievements or competition awards. However, the final adjustments to these weightings might be made based on the manager's personal judgment without rigorous scientific justification. This gap may arise from:

Managers not having a clear service-oriented goal and instead focusing on problem-solving in isolation.

Lack of familiarity or compliance with the processes for setting service standards, or a lack of scientific procedures for establishing them.

Insufficient awareness of the objective factors that should be considered when setting standards.

To close the expectation gap between service providers and students, managers must first adopt a goal-oriented approach, ensuring that the ultimate aim of services is to meet the needs of students and faculty. This goal should not only be reflected in service philosophies but should also permeate every step of the service process. Moreover, service standards should be formulated as clearly and accurately as possible, minimizing subjective interference. Standards must be comprehensive, ensuring that all service staff can understand and implement them accurately. For instance, procedures for handling student affairs should specify timeframes, methods, and outcomes to reduce misunderstandings. Strategies for improving service quality should include continuous feedback collection, rapid issue resolution, regular updates to standards, and leveraging information technology to enhance convenience and efficiency.

2.3 The Delivery Gap

The most commonly recognized and easily identified gap is Gap 3, the difference between service standards and actual service delivery. This gap is particularly common in academic administration, such as interpreting curriculum plans, graduation requirements, or handling specific administrative tasks. For instance, many universities have established academic warning mechanisms for students facing academic difficulties, offering various intervention strategies. However, in practice, implementation often deviates from the standards. For example, if students at the highest level of warning are required to have their parents come to the school for a meeting but this is bypassed due to inconvenience or strong parental refusal, the issue could lead to serious consequences later.

Key points to address this gap include:

Raising awareness of the importance of adhering to standards among service staff, such as through regular training and assessments.

Clarifying responsibilities to ensure that all tasks are assigned and executed without overlap or omission.

Ensuring all tasks are governed by specific regulations and standards, updating or creating them when needed.

Evaluating whether existing standards are feasible in practice and revising them if necessary.

Establishing a supervision mechanism to regularly check compliance with standards and correct deviations.

By ensuring that service staff understand and follow the appropriate standards, both work efficiency and service quality can improve.

2.4 Communication Gap

The communication gap (Gap 4) in undergraduate office operations often manifests as a discrepancy between the promised service to faculty and students and the actual service delivered. A common example is the promise made by senior managers, such as the deputy secretary, that counselors will act as students' "trusted friends" and "life mentors," available 24 hours to address questions and provide support. In practice, however, counselors are often responsible for managing a large number of students while also handling administrative tasks, making it impossible for them to be available 24/7. Moreover, counselors' professional backgrounds and experience vary, meaning they may not be fully equipped to act as "life mentors" in areas such as academic guidance or psychological counseling, which require specialized expertise.

This gap can lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction among students, as well as putting immense pressure on counselors, potentially resulting in burnout. It can also damage the credibility and reputation of the undergraduate office. Bridging this gap is therefore crucial for improving service quality and maintaining healthy student-staff relationships.

To close this gap, several key actions are recommended:

2.4.1 Enhance horizontal communication

Establish regular communication mechanisms, such as monthly forums where the undergraduate office and student representatives can engage in direct dialogue. Additionally, use modern communication channels like WeChat to quickly collect and respond to student feedback.

2.4.2 Avoid overpromising services

When making service promises, be realistic and avoid overly idealized descriptions. Any potential service limitations should be clearly communicated, such as extended processing times during peak periods. Regularly review and update service commitments to ensure they align with actual capabilities.

2.4.3 Clarify service scope and limitations

Clearly outline working hours, including regular office hours, lunch breaks, and holiday schedules. Explicitly state any common issues that cannot be handled, along with the reasons, to avoid misunderstandings.

2.4.4 Set clear timelines for time-sensitive tasks

Clearly communicate any time limits for certain services and explain why requests beyond those limits may not be processed.

By implementing these measures, undergraduate offices can gradually narrow the gap between the promised and actual services. This not only enhances service quality but also strengthens student trust and satisfaction. Furthermore, this process of continuous improvement fosters self-reflection and growth within the undergraduate office, ultimately contributing to a virtuous cycle of service excellence.

2.5 The Quality Gap

The service quality gap refers to the difference between students' expectations and their perceptions of the service they receive from the undergraduate office. This gap is a cumulative effect of the previous four gaps and directly impacts students' overall evaluation of the service. For instance, students may expect a fast and professional process for academic status changes, but in reality, they might encounter cumbersome procedures and inexperienced staff.

Closing the service quality gap involves addressing Gaps 1 through 4, implementing corresponding measures, and establishing a service quality management system that fosters a positive interaction between the undergraduate office and students. This includes accurately understanding student needs, setting reasonable service standards, improving execution, making realistic service promises, and continuously monitoring and improving service quality.

3. Conclusion and Outlook

Based on the above analysis, we can adapt the relevant service quality model to the specific context of undergraduate offices. By understanding and addressing the identified gaps—cognitive, standards, delivery, communication, and quality—undergraduate offices can significantly improve the quality of their services. Effective strategies include improving communication, clarifying service standards, enhancing execution, and aligning service promises with actual capabilities. Continuous monitoring and improvement will ensure the development of a robust service quality management system that benefits both students and staff. This process also creates a foundation for long-term improvements, ensuring that undergraduate offices can better meet the evolving needs of students and maintain high service standards.

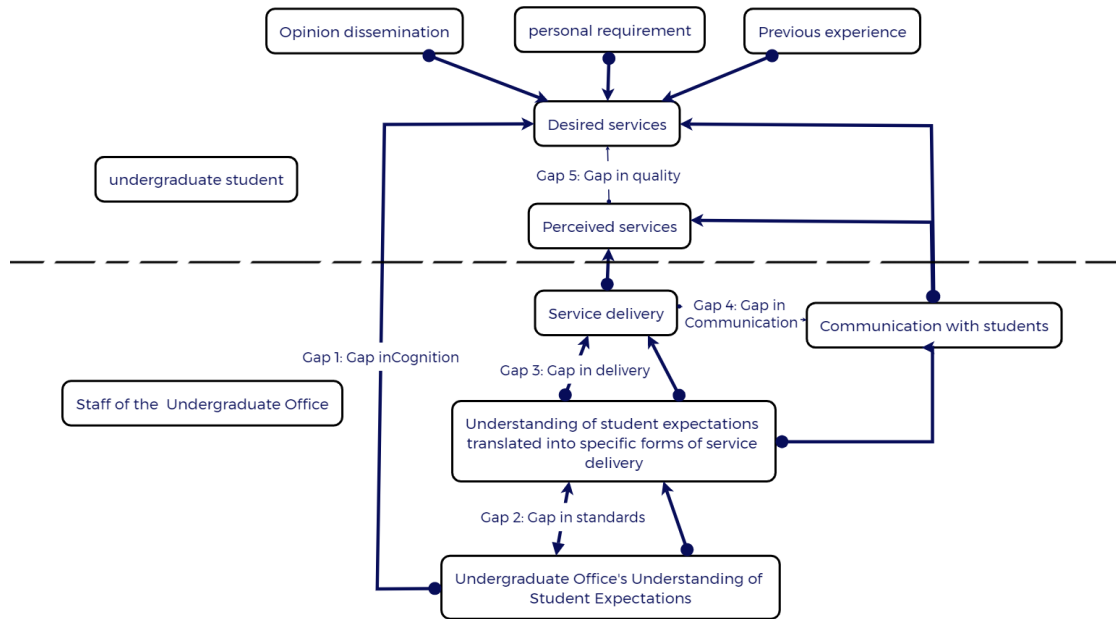


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Actual Service Quality Gap Model in the Undergraduate Office Context

This paper systematically analyzes the service quality of university undergraduate-related departments through the application of the SERVQUAL model. It explores the expectation gaps between service providers and recipients and proposes targeted improvement strategies.^[4]

In terms of the cognitive gap, the paper emphasizes the importance of enhancing communication with students to more accurately grasp their service needs. Regarding the standards gap, it highlights the necessity of setting clear and accurate service standards to ensure their scientific and reasonable nature. For the delivery gap, the paper discusses the need to improve awareness of execution and ensure that regulations are effectively implemented. In addressing the communication gap, it analyzes the inconsistency between service promises and actual services, reminding us to avoid overpromising and ensure transparency and authenticity in communication. Lastly, regarding the quality gap, it discusses the significant discrepancy between students' expectations and their perceived service, stressing the need for continuous monitoring and improvement of service quality.

Looking forward, the undergraduate office should continue to deepen the construction of its service quality management system, optimizing service processes and improving efficiency and quality. It should also enhance the application of information technology, utilizing tools like big data and artificial intelligence^[5] to monitor and analyze the service process in real-time, enabling personalized and precise services. Moreover, the office should establish and improve internal supervision and incentive mechanisms^[6], encouraging staff to actively participate in the continuous improvement of service quality.

In the field of higher education, improving service quality is a long-term and complex process that requires the joint efforts of universities, faculty, students, and society. Through continuous practical exploration and theoretical research, we have reason to believe that the service quality of undergraduate offices will continue to improve, providing a solid foundation for cultivating more outstanding socialist builders and successors.

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