

STUDENT SATISFACTION IN THAI PRIVATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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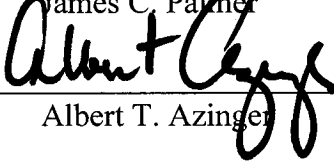
PREVIEW

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## STUDENT SATISFACTION IN THAI PRIVATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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The purpose of this study was to assess students' satisfaction with Thai private vocational schools. The study proposed a model based on Astin's input–environment–outcome model by identifying factors that were related to satisfaction. The concepts of Pace's quality of effort and customer satisfaction also provided the theoretical framework for the analysis in this study.


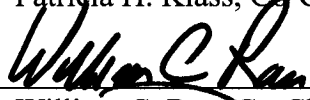
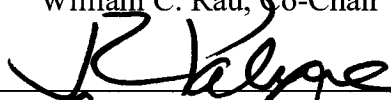
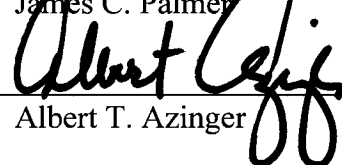
The target population comprised students who studied in the commercial field at the certificate level of the private vocational schools in Bangkok, Thailand. Three hundred eighty-nine students from all three grade levels participated. The Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ), revision 1999, was adapted for use in collecting data. A factor analysis was conducted on items from the questionnaire as a data reduction technique and to determine useful factor scales. A multiple regression analysis with backward elimination was then used to determine the significant predictors of satisfaction after controlling for a variety of variables.

The majority of participants were generally satisfied with their schools. The findings revealed six factors and variables that were significant predictors of satisfaction, namely, school environment, estimate of gain in career and work skills, use of computer

technology, major, current GPA, and living on campus or in an apartment. These measures explained 32% of the variance in satisfaction. Among them, school environment was the best predictor.

Many factors and variables, including academic engagement and school-related social activities, showed indirect relationships with satisfaction through the estimate of gain in career and work skills and the school environment. The study confirmed that involvement had both direct and indirect effects on satisfaction. Some background variables, including Grade 9 GPA, were found to have only an indirect relationship with student satisfaction.

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Last, I would like to dedicate this study to my dear family: to my husband, Supphakit, who showed his love, understanding, encouragement, and faith in my ability to complete this task, and who sacrificed cherished family time that I would have spent with him and our little son, Nathapath. This study is also dedicated to my parents, my

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P. R.

PREVIEW

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

Customer satisfaction is an important goal and the core of a marketing orientation and practice for profit, nonprofit, industrial, or educational organizations. In the business sector, most successful companies compete by delivering excellent services for their customers by aiming for TCS—total customer satisfaction. Xerox is an example of a company providing guaranteed satisfaction. Xerox will replace equipment for any dissatisfied customer for a period of 3 years after purchase at its expense (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

It is the same in the educational sector. Educational institutions also pay attention to satisfying various groups of people connected with their institutions, namely, students, parents of students, alumni, and professors. To help educational institutions be competitive, they try to determine what variables are related to students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It is the responsibility of school administrators to determine the most effective theories and apply them to improve their institutions and to ensure that students are satisfied. Therefore, management strategies that lack a basic understanding of current internal customer needs and satisfaction may fail. This statement is true not only in the United States but also in many other countries, including Thailand.

Currently, Thailand is entering an era of evolution in education. According to the 1999 National Education Act, from October 2002 the Thai government must provide

basic compulsory education through Grade 9 and provide free education until grade 12 (Section 43). The extended year of basic education and free education will raise the number of educated persons and the educational level of the people in Thailand. It will also increase the competition among public and private institutions, especially at the upper secondary level (Grades 10 to 12), because the government will provide education to all students in this level to receive this education free of charge. This will increase the number of students who want to study in public schools compared to private schools, because it is free and because public vocational schools are considered more effective than private vocational schools. As a result, a small percentage of students who are of middle to high socioeconomic status (SES) will attend private vocational schools. These schools must provide a learning and teaching environment that will increase student performance and create student satisfaction. Competition among schools is very high, and these schools need to find strategies to increase and retain student enrollment. One effective strategy that is widely chosen is to satisfy their students.

Generally, it is believed that students who are more satisfied with their college experience are more likely than dissatisfied students to perform at, and even beyond, their potential and persist toward a degree. Students who are satisfied with their college life historically fare much better, not only in terms of academic performance and personal development, but later in life as well (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991). Wince and Borden (1995) found that students who were retained and who graduated were significantly more satisfied with their general academic experience than students who withdrew. However, the relationship between satisfaction and other variables, such as college experience, is certainly complex. Walker-Marshall and Hudson (1999) also indicated that

. . . satisfied students were more likely to be successful than those who were less satisfied with college. Again, it is not known if better students are more satisfied with college as a consequence of their academic success, or if higher levels of satisfaction improve academic success. (p. 12)

Student satisfaction may be associated as either an outcome or a predictor of a student's experience in college.

For many decades, studies have been conducted to examine student satisfaction and its relationship to other variables. Some studies have examined the individual student's satisfaction with his or her role as a student, different programs or curricula of instruction, different aspects of the college environment and their experience with the environment, and overall satisfaction with the college experience. Another body of research has attempted to determine the correlation between satisfaction and variables such as achievement and involvement. According to the literature, assessing student satisfaction is important to improve the quality of both in-class and out-of-class experiences.

#### The Need for Satisfaction Studies in Thailand

Since 1997, the economy in Thailand has declined. Many institutions, including educational organizations, have experienced negative effects from this situation. An increased dropout rate and lower enrollment are problems faced by both public and private schools. Some private schools have closed because they have neither recruited nor maintained adequate student numbers.

Vocational schools are one sector of the Thai education system that has dealt with these problems. Because vocational education is one of the major educational tracks in Thailand, problems in this sector should be examined. According to 1999 data from the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), of the students who enrolled in



this upper secondary level, 39.19% (668,400) studied in vocational schools (ONEC, 2001).

Among vocational schools, private schools seem to have more serious problems, because the main income in private schools comes from students' tuition, whereas public schools have budgetary support from the government. With the new National Education Act, which requires the government to provide free education through the upper secondary level, parents want their children to attend public schools because of cheaper tuition fees and because public schools have higher prestige in society. The problem in private schools is worsening because the government has allowed public vocational schools and public high schools, which are their main competitors, to enroll more students in an effort to help parents whose incomes have declined and also to alleviate their own financial problems.

Owing to this circumstance, competition among both public and private schools has increased. Private vocational schools, under intense pressure and competition, have had to focus increased attention on their customer satisfaction to enroll and keep students in their schools. Many private schools have applied specific management strategies such as total quality management and quality assurance to keep improving their institutions. Unfortunately, there is not enough recorded data on students' satisfaction with either public or private vocational school education in Thailand; therefore, the application of many quality management techniques might not be efficient if they are implemented with limited data. Vocational school leaders should assess their students' satisfaction to ensure that their investment and management techniques maintain and increase students' satisfaction toward their school's academic goals.

Assessing students' satisfaction with various aspects related to the learning environment of private vocational schools is important because it helps ensure that students' perception, needs, preferences, and satisfaction are addressed. In the long term, the results of this study will allow both private and public vocational schools in Thailand the opportunity to assess and improve student satisfaction. Furthermore, incorporation of the findings into the school planning process could provide ongoing improvement in vocational education overall.

#### Problem Statement

Under intense competition among vocational schools, schools have to ensure that their organizations can continue to survive. The key for the survival of a school depends on its ability to analyze and fulfill its customer satisfaction. Without understanding the levels of student satisfaction, as well as the factors that contribute to or detract from that satisfaction, educators at private vocational schools will not be able to address the marketing needs and remain viable in today's competitive educational environment.

#### Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to determine the degree of satisfaction among students in private vocational schools and to identify predictors of that satisfaction, such as students' academic engagement, estimate of gain, social relations, school-related social activities, previous education scores, parents' SES, and parenting practices. This study will provide information about student satisfaction and its correlates, which will allow the researcher to make recommendations about what schools can do to create an environment that fosters satisfaction, encourages student behavior that leads to satisfaction, and markets the schools in ways that appeal to prospective students.

### Research Questions

This research study addressed the following questions about private vocational schools in Bangkok, Thailand:

1. What is the relationship between the degree of students' academic engagement and students' satisfaction with their school?
2. What is the relationship between students' estimate of gain and students' satisfaction with their school?
3. What is the relationship between students' social relationships and students' satisfaction with their school?
4. What is the relationship between school-related social activities and students' satisfaction with their school?

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was derived from three overlapping branches of literature, namely, the concept of marketing, the concept of student satisfaction, and the concept of quality of effort. The concept of marketing, as described by Kotler and Fox (1995), "emphasizes the main task of the institution to determine the needs and wants, and interests of its consumers and to adapt the institution to delivery satisfactions that preserve or enhance the consumer's and society's well-being and long-term interests" (p. 10). Under this marketing concept, organizations can survive if they meet or exceed the needs and expectations of their customers. Similarly, they have to maintain or exceed their customers' satisfaction. Since the level of satisfaction is determined by the difference between service performance, as perceived by consumers, and their expectations of that performance, the institution's delivery of service has to match its customer's expectations. Kotler and Fox also added that these expectations are

formed on the basis of a person's prior experience, from statements by friends and associates, and through communications with the institution (p. 42).

Second, scholarly interest in the impact of the college environment has shown a number of ideas related to students' satisfaction. Astin's conceptual model, the "input-environment-outcomes" (I-E-O) model, consists of three components. Inputs refers to those personal qualities the students bring initially to the educational program; the environment refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program; and outcomes refers to students' satisfaction with the educational program (Astin, 1993a). The I-E-O model produces information on how student satisfaction outcomes are affected by various college practices.

The third concept, quality of effort, is derived from another scholar in higher education literature, Charles Robert Pace. Pace's (1984) view is that "all learning and development require an investment of time and effort by the student. Time is a frequency dimension. Effort is a quality of the educational process" (p. 5). Students are

accountable for the amount, scope, and quality of effort they invest in their own learning and development, and specifically in using the facilities and opportunities that are available in the college setting. Accountability for achievement and related student outcomes must consider both what the institution offers and what the students do with those offerings. (Pace, 1984, p. 7)

According to Pace's conceptual idea, this study should assess the outcome, namely, student satisfaction, by measuring students' "quality of effort," which focuses on how students use the major school resources and opportunities for learning and personal growth.

In summary, the three conceptual frameworks were used to examine student satisfaction. The marketing concept focused on the problem of identifying students' needs,

which results in increasing satisfaction. Results derived from this study's operationalization of the I-E-O model may suggest ways for changing school environments in ways that will increase satisfaction. Pace's concept of "quality of effort" will help schools identify and encourage student behaviors that lead to a more satisfying college experience.

#### Significance of the Study

This study of student satisfaction could serve as basic information for school administrators to develop overall school quality. When we consider the investment of time, energy, and money students spend in attending college, the perception of their experiences should be given considerable value. Astin (1993a) stated that assessing student satisfaction outcomes is important because it encompasses "the students' subjective experience during the college years and perceptions of the value of the educational experience itself" (p. 61). In addition, referring to Banta's (1985) research on assessing students' experiences, Astin noted that "satisfaction data obtained from students surveys can lead to substantial changes in institutional policy" (p. 61).

Because the literature regarding student satisfaction has been conducted primarily with college students in Western cultures, more studies in countries such as Thailand are needed, especially to assess the needs of vocational students. Most of the student satisfaction assessments conducted in the past have judged the quality of teaching at schools and the intellectual stimulation of courses rather than concentrating on students' quality of effort and overall aspects of the school environment. Therefore, it is quite difficult for school administrators, teachers, policymakers, or service divisions in the Ministry of Education (MOE) to understand educational development in terms of changing economic conditions.

Results from this study should provide information about student satisfaction in vocational schools. It should be the first of a number of studies that local and national agencies could continue, which would lead to long-term overall improvement in Thai vocational education.

### Overview of Thai Vocational Education

To understand the context of the study, one must know some basic facts about the Thai educational system. In Thailand, basic education comprises preprimary education, primary education, and secondary education. Vocational schools are part of the secondary system. Grades 7 to 12 are divided into two levels, the lower secondary level (years 7–9) and the upper secondary education (years 10–12). The 3-year upper secondary schooling system is divided into two parallel tracks: general or academic, and vocational tracks.

Private vocational schools are overseen by the MOE. According to the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC, 2001), the education system of vocational training can be divided into two types: upper secondary education, and lower than the bachelor's degree level. The upper secondary education aims to enable learners who are usually 15 to 17 years old to acquire the basis either for going further into higher education or for working and pursuing a career suitable to their aptitude. Students who have completed Grade 9 are eligible for this program. Students who complete this program will gain vocational certification, and their educational level is equivalent to Grade 12. The lower than bachelor's degree level aims to promote learners' knowledge and vocational skills at the middle level. Students study in this program for 2 years, and after completing this program they will gain a vocational diploma. They may go to college for 2 more years to gain a bachelor's degree. Usually, most private vocational

schools provide both programs for students, the upper secondary and the lower than bachelor's degree levels, to form a 5-year program.

The structure of the upper secondary school curriculum, as written by the MOE for both academic and vocational streams consists of four components (ONEC, 2001):

1. Core subjects: basic subjects that correspond to life and society in general that must be taken by all students.
2. Prescribed elective subjects: basic subjects that differ according to local conditions and needs.
3. Free elective subjects: subjects that are open for learners to choose according to their interests, aptitudes, and needs.
4. Activities: All schools are required to organize three types of activities for learners: those organized in accordance with the regulations of the MOE; guidance, remedial teaching, or academic development activities; and independent activities of learners.

#### Definition of Terms

Extracurricular activities: activities in school in which students are not required to participate but that are provided by the school.

GPA: the grade point average that a student earns based on a 4.00-point scale of measurement.

Major of study: the special area of study that students select as their major field. The key majors of study are computer business, sales, accounting, foreign language, and secretary.

SES: a person's standard of living. In this study, parents' education was used as a proxy for SES.

Satisfaction: "a person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectation." (Kotler, 2000, p.36)

School environment: student perception toward the support of teachers and staff, the value of courses, and climate of the school.

Vocational school: schools that provide a certificate level of education for Grades 10 to 12, with emphasis on training in business administration vocational skills.

## Method

### Population

The present study was focused on students who were studying in the Lower Certificate Level of Vocational Education track in the commerce program in Thai private vocational schools in the Bangkok area. Private vocational schools that used the curriculum from the Office of the Private Education Commission, a department of the Ministry of Education (MOE), were selected. According to data reported by the Records Division, Office of the Private Education Commission, 62 private vocational schools in Bangkok opened commerce programs in the year 1999. Among this number, 36 are large-scale schools, 12 are medium-sized, and 13 are small-sized schools. One could say that the majority of schools in Bangkok, about 79% of the total, are medium- to large-sized. Therefore, the sample group targeted for this study was medium- to large-sized schools.