

# KM in Higher Education: Modeling Student Help-Avoidance Behaviors and Performance

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## ABSTRACT

*The application of corporate knowledge management (KM) practices such as customer relationship management (CRM) within the academic environment is considered within the sphere of student relationship management (SRM). By engaging in SRM, key issues such as student help-avoidance behaviors can be proactively addressed to ensure academic achievement and success.*

*This study describes the development of a structural model to investigate how student help-avoidance is related to perceived academic performance. We based our model on one developed by Butler (1998) which includes autonomous orientation, ability-focused orientation, and expedient orientation as three dimensions of the help-avoidance construct. Preliminary results of a survey of 130 undergraduate students taking an IT course indicate that besides the three dimensions of help-avoidance, students have other student- and instructor-specific perspectives of help-avoidance also exist.*

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, higher education, student help-seeking, help-avoidance, academic performance, student relationship management, structural equation model.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is a relatively new management activity which many companies have embraced in an attempt to meet the challenges of an increasingly global business environment to compete over customers. Even though some have questioned the view that educational institutions can be and indeed are in business (Bishton, 2005), the competitive wave is being experienced in educational institutions. More than ever before, higher educational institutions now have to compete for students. Competition is particularly fierce among those institutions that are moving away from research and putting more emphasis on teaching. For teaching-oriented institutions, the student is the focal entity. While the debate about the view of students -- as customers, products, or partners (Clyason & Heley, 2005; Obermiller, Fleernor, & Raven, 2005) is far from being over, for institutions that consider students as their "raison d'être," the predominant view is that students are their customers.

The view of students as customers brings two expectations. First, students are expected to seek help in the course of their studies to ensure the best academic achievement and success just as customers would seek help in the course of using a product or service for maximum benefit. Second, since the value proposition of KM in the corporate world includes innovation, customer intimacy, and operational excellence (Kindwell, Vander Linde, & Johnson, 2000), teaching-oriented institutions are expected to embrace KM with a vested interest in student intimacy. Student intimacy can be attained through the establishment of student relationship management (SRM) programs just as companies have established various customer relationship management (CRM) programs for the same parallel purpose. The foregoing expectations remain largely unmet. For example, whereas most customers will readily seek help from company help-desks, the same is not true of most students, who do not often approach instructors ("university help-desks") to seek help in the course of their studies. Equally, with every effort is made to recruit and retain students, few or no educational institutions have any SRM programs in place to help understand student help-avoidance or promote help-seeking behavior. SRM will foster help-seeking behaviors of students for two potential benefits --

instructors are able to fill gaps in student knowledge and adapt teaching, both of which should contribute to student achievement and success.

This purpose of this study is develops a structural equation model to delineate factors that account for student help-avoidance behaviors, and subsequently relate it to academic performance. We base our model on a previously developed model to investigate the relationship between help-avoidance and style of help-seeking behavior (Butler, 1998). As we apply the model in the higher educational setting, we attempt to answer the following questions: (1) why do students avoid seeking help when doing their academic assignments?; (2) how does help-seeking behaviors relate to academic performance?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

KM can be used to learn about students' needs and behaviors just as is done in the corporate world with respect to customers. In this review, we examine the nature of the relationship between students and educational institutions (referred further as universities) as well as discussion on the student help-avoidance and help-seeking behavior.

### 2.1 Student-University Relationship

The nature of the student-university relationship is highly debated and three orientations of how students should be considered have been discussed in the literature. The first orientation considers students as customers, the second as products, and the third as partners to universities. Many institutions do not explicitly state their orientations of students as customers (Clyason & Heley, 2005). These authors cite evidence that have shown that indeed the customer-oriented view of student implicitly exists in most universities. For example, marketing material for future students resembles marketing material for customers in the corporate world, the urge by university departments to write marketing plans, the requirement for students to complete customer-like surveys about their educational experiences including evaluation of instructors.

In an empirical study involving instructors and students, Obermiller *et al.* (2005) found that instructors preferred referring to students as products while students preferred being referred to as customers. However, both instructors and students "believe the other orientation prevails" (p. 27). In an earlier study students were more deterministic about being called customers, and the researchers concluded that the operation of higher education was consumer-driven (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). The use of both customer and products orientations has been advocated (Conway & Yorke, 1991). Other think referring to students as customers or products is not appropriate (Franz, 1998; Bay & Daniel, 2001; Bishton, 2005; Clyason & Heley, 2005).

An emerging view of students as partners has been proposed (Bay & Daniel, 2001). Although we support this view, we contend that KM practices associated with CRM can be applied to the partnership under the appellation of SRM as previously discussed.

### 2.2 Student Help-Avoidance and Styles of Help-Seeking Behaviors

When faced with a problem, between the alternatives of giving up or persisting unsuccessful alone and seeking help, it has been recommended that seeking help is the most valuable thing to do (Newman, 1991). Failure to heed to the foregoing

recommendation may be due to several factors, including consideration that the cost of help-seeking outweighs the benefits of help-avoidance (Nadler, 1997), striving for independent mastery (Butler & Neuman, 1995), culture; where students tend to avoid embarrassment (Hambrecht, 2006), and reward; where high achieving students seek help for personal difficulties related to course work (Taplin, Yum, Jegede *et al.*, 2001).

Other studies have pointed out that seeking or avoiding help, especially in computer mediated environments is dependent on the nature of learner-oriented factors such as help facilities (Bartholome, Stahl, Pierschl *et al.*, 2006). Cognitive tutors have been developed in an attempt to help students learn to seek help (Aleven, McLaren, Roll *et al.*, 2004). Evidence suggests that those who seek help have better learning outcomes, whereas those who really need help are less likely to seek help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Help-avoidance have been characterized as a multidimensional construct and studied in relationship with the style of help-seeking behaviors (Butler, 1998). The help-avoidance construct has three dimensions – autonomous orientation, ability-focused orientation, and expedient orientation. The author defined autonomous help-avoidance orientation as striving for independent mastery; ability-focused as desiring to mask incompetence, and expedient orientation as reluctance to seek help attributed to the perception that asking for help will not expedite the task. The author used the model to investigate the relationship between help-avoidance and styles of help-seeking behaviors (autonomous –first trying to solve a problem before asking for help, executive – request help relatively early, and avoidant-covert – requesting little overt help). In an experimental study in a K-12 environment, it was found that autonomous help-avoiders are likely to engage in autonomous help-seeking style; expedient help-avoiders used the executive help-seeking style; and ability-focused help avoiders used the avoidant-covert help-seeking style (Butler, 1998).

### 3. HELP-AVOIDANCE AND PERFORMANCE RESEARCH MODEL

We adapted the help-avoidance model proposed by (Butler, 1998) to the context of a university environment and investigated the relationship between the various orientations and perceived academic performance. The research model is shown in figure 1.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

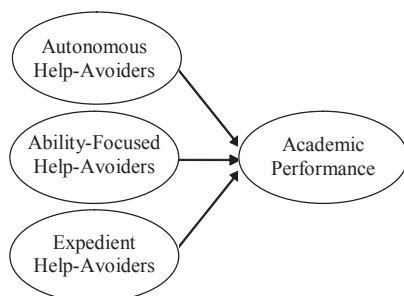
### 4.1 Instrumentation and Sample

To measure help-avoidance, we used a modified version of the 17-item instrument proposed by Butler (1998). The modified instrument was reviewed by four instructors for clarity and consistency. Perceived academic performance was measured using the six items below. One hundred and thirty students from eight sections of an undergraduate IT course were surveyed to collect data for the study. Each student was asked to rate his/her performance compared to fellow students in the class using a five-point scale (SD –Strongly Disagree, D-Disagree, N-Not Sure, A-Agree, and SA-Strongly Agree):

“Compared to your fellow students taking the course, you: ...”

1. Have or will have a better grade in the course

Figure 1. Help-avoidance and performance model



2. Are more satisfied with the class organization
3. Are more satisfied with the course material
4. Are more satisfied with the way the course is taught
5. Are more satisfied with the course instructor
6. Have a higher Grade Point Average (GPA)

Besides the reasons pointed out in the research instrument, students were asked to identify one other reason why they believe may explain why students do not ask for help. Demographic information was also solicited, including number of credit hours and working status.

## 5. PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND FUTURE WORK

Preliminary analysis of the responses to the qualitative question requesting students to state one reason they believe students do not ask for help indicate some student-oriented reasons such as students being lazy, students not wanting to learn, not caring if they get it right, scared and preserve self-respect, think attention being bad, and not wanting to slow progress. Instructor-oriented reasons cited include expectation of students to know certain things ahead of time and sometimes, instructor tells everything but the answer to the question asked.

Future work will focus on analyzing the data and examining the results to see if the same three dimensional model of help-avoidance is applicable to higher educational environments. Results from the study would provide management indicators for the establishment of SRM programs geared at understanding and eliminating help-avoidance. SRM will foster help-seeking behaviors of students for two potential benefits -- instructors are able to fill gaps in student knowledge and adapt teaching, both of which should contribute to student achievement and success.

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