Howard County Library System
Customer Service Philosophy:
Service is Personal
The Team

Lew Belfont (Chair)
Yao E. Aziabu
Katie George
Elizabeth M. Haynes
Susan L. Stonesifer

We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.
Aristotle
Howard County Library System’s Authentic Values

Respect

We demonstrate respect when we value and appreciate each other, communicate assertively and honestly, facilitate mutual learning, and coordinate our knowledge and skills to achieve Howard County Library System’s mission. Mutual respect enables us to make effective decisions, take decisive action, imagine new possibilities, and achieve our goals.

Inclusiveness

Everyone at HCLS is a leader and a designer. We are simultaneously ambitious yet humble. We are also aware of our own limits and respectful of the expertise of others. We actively solicit the insights of our colleagues when making important decisions, solving crucial problems, or designing innovative curriculum components.

Unity

We are a community of people with diverse perspectives, knowledge, and skills, working together to achieve HCLS’ mission. Through collaboration, communication, and coordination, our individual perspectives become a collective vision.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication facilitates solidarity and contributes to our success. We communicate assertively to leverage our knowledge and talents to achieve HCLS’ mission, professional excellence, and personal fulfillment.

Continuing Education

Continuing education for staff is the continuous process of developing the knowledge, skills and confidence essential to achieve personal and professional excellence. Learning starts with humility. Despite past achievements, we know there is always something new for us to learn. The most effective continuing education is goal oriented. A primary goal is perfecting our job performance. We achieve this goal by staying current with our knowledge and skills.
Exceptional Customer Service

We provide equal opportunity in education for everyone. We value our customers and seek to understand their needs, interests, and objectives. Our goal is to meet and anticipate their needs, exceeding their expectations every time they connect with us to create meaningful experiences.

Progress

We are an innovative, forward-thinking team, dedicated to continuous improvement and creating tomorrow’s successes built upon today’s accomplishments. Individually and together, we regularly pause to reflect on our accomplishments. Through reflection and consultation, we align our intentions with our actions to produce extraordinary results.

Distinctive Sense of Purpose

Who are we? We are partners in education.

What do we do? We deliver equal opportunity in education for everyone through a curriculum that comprises Three Pillars:

- Self-Directed Education
- Research Assistance & Instruction
- Instructive & Enlightening Experiences

Why does it matter? Because education drives economic advancement, enhancing quality of life.

We strive each day to realize our mission and vision.
Our Mission
We deliver high-quality public education for all ages.

Our Vision
A major component of Howard County’s strong education system, we advance the economy, enhancing quality of life.

Seven Internal Pillars
We accomplish our vision by living our seven internal pillars, each of which is described in our strategic plan:

- Authentic Values (see also above)
- Strategic Vocabulary
- Everyone a Leader
- Winning Teamwork
- Community Partnerships
- The Power of Us
- Fiercely Loyal Customers

Choose Civility
In addition, we embrace Choose Civility, aspiring to attain the initiative’s vision by choosing respect, consideration, empathy, and tolerance as our fundamental values when interacting with each other and with our customers.

Customer Service Philosophy
Essential to achieving our vision is our Customer Service Philosophy. This philosophy is the lens through which we perceive our colleagues and customers, the map that orients our actions, and the system of meaning that provides us with purpose and goals. It gives us an integrated, consistent basis for interpreting policies and procedures, making judgments and decisions, and providing exceptional service, an HCLS hallmark.
A customer service philosophy enables us continually to assess and adjust our world-class curriculum, bolstering all Three Pillars in the most critical subject areas of interest to our customers.

Living the Customer Service Philosophy

Created by a team of Customer Service and Instructor & Research Specialists, this document incorporates input from supervisors and front line staff, including rookies and veterans. Its content outlines how a customer service philosophy can assist us in achieving the vision of Howard County Library System. When we put on our name badges and step behind a Customer Service or Research Desk, we personify our Customer Service Philosophy. We prize its values, operate from its assumptions, and model its behaviors. We achieve our values through incomparable customer service.

Values

Values are enduring beliefs about what is important, worthwhile, and valuable to us.

The Authentic Values delineated in our strategic plan, Public Education for All, identify and define our primary values.

Here is an example: We value our customers and their needs.

Operating Assumptions

Based on our values, our operating assumptions are guidelines to which we refer whenever we assist customers, interpret policies, solve customer service problems, or handle unfamiliar situations.

Here is an example: Always assume customers are being truthful, unless evidence indicates otherwise.

Operating assumptions such as this connect values and behaviors.

Behavior

Behavior refers to decision-making, problem-solving, talking, and listening.

The following scenario illustrates how we can realize our values through appropriate behavior.
Staff: “According to our records, many items were returned late, and your account shows $65 in fines. Let me print your record.” (Gives the customer the printout.)

Customer: (Reviews the list.) “Although I did borrow all these books, I am certain that I returned them on time. I’ve never owed this much and I am a responsible library user. I’m puzzled by this list.”

Staff: “We may have made a mistake. The books are returned. Since you are certain, I’ll clear your account.”

From the non-accusatory opening statement to clearing the customer’s account, this staff member’s remarks and actions demonstrate her respect for this customer. She assumes the customer is being truthful, as there is no factual evidence to disprove her claim. This scenario provides an illustration of integrity, a major goal of our customer service philosophy. Integrity is the consistency of our behaviors and values. Acting with integrity ensures customer satisfaction.

This Customer Service Philosophy articulates the essence of our values, operating assumptions, and behaviors. The philosophy becomes richer and fuller as we make it our own. Each of us must translate it into our own words. Although we may personalize some of the actions and behaviors outlined below, we will be on the same page with regard to the methods and goals of customer service.

Customer Service: A Partnership

Customer service is a partnership between HCLS staff and customers. The partnership is based on shared expectations, and produces mutual benefits.

What do customers expect from the partnership?
Customers expect us to provide a curriculum that adds value to their lives.

What does this mean?
Customers:

- Use HCLS for many reasons: to complete a school project, research a car purchase, prepare for the real estate licensing exam, find a great book or movie, or participate in classes and events.
- Expect high-quality collections and classes. They want materials to be accessible, available, and portable, and expect classes and events that are expertly taught and organized.
- Expect service to be convenient.
- Apply simple math. Their overall experience when borrowing a DVD, attending a seminar, or reserving a bestseller must be perceived as time well spent.
Customers expect more than fast service

They expect us to:

- Be welcoming, enthusiastic, and respectful.
- Listen actively.
- Answer their questions expertly and accurately.
- Check out materials promptly and correctly.
- Be their advocates, using our knowledge and skills to connect them with appropriate resources and ensure their successful use of the library.
- Solve their problems graciously and make fair decisions, applying policies and procedures equitably, making adjustments when possible to accommodate their needs.

What do we expect from the partnership?

We expect the loyalty and support of customers. The quality of our customer service and curriculum will make customers lifelong HCLS users and advocates. Satisfied customers will spread the word about us throughout the community, encouraging their friends and neighbors to visit the library, and elected officials to support our mission.

Professional satisfaction

We also derive professional satisfaction from the partnership, knowing that our distinctive sense of purpose has enhanced our customers’ quality of life.

Applying our Operating Assumptions and Values

To consistently exceed customers’ expectations, each of us must adopt the following operating assumptions, which help us interpret customers’ behaviors and clarify our goals. Some offer guidance in problem solving. A few regulate our own behaviors, keeping in check personal tendencies that can hinder our ability to achieve our values.

We:

Value customer needs

We lend materials, answer questions, assist with research, teach classes, and organize events to provide high-quality public education for all. We act with integrity to satisfy customers’ human desire to feel valued, respected and trusted. While there may be times when we cannot completely meet the educational needs of customers, we should always be able to meet their human needs.
Encourage customers to be responsible library users

We assume customers value the library and will cooperate with each other and HCLS staff, adhering to HCLS policies and procedures. We practice positive, rather than negative, reinforcement to facilitate such cooperation.

Believe customers will return our respect

We believe in the following self-fulfilling prophecy: Treat customers fairly and respectfully, and they will repay us in kind.

Assume customers are trustworthy unless their behavior indicates otherwise

Assume that customers are honest. We cannot discern honesty from a customer’s manner or tone of voice. Check your skepticism and give each customer the benefit of the doubt and a chance to save face in any circumstance.

Do not judge customers

We do not initially question any customer’s reason for using the library. All needs are equal. Our role is to listen actively, apply our knowledge, and provide assistance.

Always deliver excellence

While the majority of customers’ requests are reasonable and achievable, challenging situations may arise. We can often deliver excellence even in these circumstances, as some policies and procedures may be open to a more liberal interpretation. Should a customer’s request for special service conflict with the needs of other customers or library policies, make a fair and thoughtful decision. Ask yourself, “Who will be helped and hurt by my decision?” A request should not be fulfilled if the disadvantages to HCLS and other customers are greater than the resulting benefits. When it is not possible to give customers what they want, we explain the reasons for our decision, identify viable options, and negotiate an alternative.

Problems are solvable to each customer’s satisfaction

Although customers are not always right, telling customers they are wrong or explaining the cause of a problem is self-defeating. When we solve customers’ problems, our goal is to educate them to prevent the problem from recurring. Every interaction with customers provides us with opportunities to explain procedures and empower customers to be successful library users. Our teaching methods are consistent with our values. Skillful and knowledgeable customers are the best library users.

We must combine these operating assumptions with the behaviors described below to provide exceptional customer service.
We Are What We Do

While the jobs of Customer Service Specialists and Instructor & Research Specialists require different technical skills and knowledge, they share the same customer service behaviors. Whether registering a customer for a library card, recommending books to read, teaching a class, or participating in an HCLS event, you are expected to model the following behaviors.

Approachable

We greet customers promptly and in a friendly fashion, using open body language, and good eye contact to make each customer feel welcomed. We employ a conversational tone of voice and use jargon-free language appropriate to each customer.

Individual attention

We stop all other activities and give the customer our undivided attention.

Personalized and responsive service

We deliver impressive personalized and responsive service, which makes each customer feel valued, respected, and understood.

Exceeding Customer Expectations

Our goal is to always exceed each customer’s expectations in order to deliver excellence in education.

How do we learn what customers need or expect?

Service starts as a conversation we have with each customer.

Our goal is to exchange information with the customer

- We want to find out what our customers are looking for.
- We want to tell customers about all aspects of our curriculum.
- An effective conversationalist is skilled at both talking and listening.
While a conversation is informal and relaxed, it is anything but unplanned

- We must know HCLS inside and out.
- We must select the right words to communicate information clearly and precisely.
- Our goal is to make a policy, procedure, or initiative understandable.

Everything we say communicates emotional messages as well

Our tone of voice and words must convey the message that we value and respect our customers.

How Do We Achieve This?

We model the following behaviors to avoid the tendency to evaluate customers inaccurately. We aim to understand the other person’s point of view and to get the other person to be more specific.

These behaviors are essential to solving service problems and interpreting policies and procedures.

Active listening

Listening is as important as talking. An effective listener concentrates on the customer.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is re-stating what customers said, enabling them to correct any misunderstandings. Questions help us understand what customers want.

Probing

Probing is an attempt to obtain more information. This tactic is most effective through the use of open-ended questions or statements.

Clarifying

Clarifying is asking questions to get more information on something that is not understood, or to sort out confusing elements of the customer’s request.
Verifying

Verifying involves paraphrasing a customer’s request once you think you have understood it. Follow up with a closed question to “nail down” specifics.

Do I Know What Kind of Service Is Expected of Me, and Why?

This Customer Service Philosophy answers the question, “Do I know what kind of service is expected of me, and why?”

Our goal is to do more than read this philosophy once and store it in our files, occasionally rereading or recalling its teachings. Our goal is to live its values.

To make these values our way of life and our collective mantra, each of us must continually ask ourselves two questions:

- Do I achieve these expectations?
- How can I improve?

Our Customer Service Philosophy initiates a new dialogue throughout Howard County Library System.

*We will celebrate our customer service successes and stay focused on our goal: service that always exceeds the expectations of our customers.*

_Service is Personal_ is the second revision of Howard County Library System’s Customer Service Philosophy, first introduced in 2002. While the philosophy itself remains unchanged, we have more fully integrated its principles with our current strategic plan, _Public Education for All_. In addition, terminology has been updated, and we have incorporated the theories of user experience design.

Lew Belfont
Public Education for All

hclibrary.org
Howard County Library System
Administrative Offices
6600 Cradlerock Way
Columbia, MD 21045