

## **“IF TEACHERS WOULD ONLY ....” HOW STUDENTS VIEW THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE**

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For a period of some eighteen months I asked classes to complete this sentence in a short written statement: “My college life would be easier and more productive if teachers would only ....” This teaching note is based on some 130 replies. The responses fall into several categories: Some are predictably whiny, juvenile, insipid, and immature. Others are self-revealing in ways students might not even intend. Still others are surprisingly perceptive and on the mark, with very practical advice for faculty. Nearly all can teach us teachers something about the mentality and attitudes of this generation of students, which, not so incidentally, might be very different from when we were college undergraduates. They can be broken down into some half dozen broad areas: 1) how teachers test; 2) time management by both students and teachers; 3) the style in which teachers present their classes and course material; 4) explaining course requirements; 5) how teachers connect or fail to connect with their students; and 6) miscellaneous observations and suggestions.

### **How Teachers Test:**

To no one’s surprise, this is an area of major concern. Students want teachers to be as precise as possible in what they test on. Ideally, for some students, nothing would be on a test that hadn’t been covered first in class. Students want more reviews before exams and detailed study guides. Some would like exams to come only from study guides, not from the reading. Also, they want teachers to test in small chunks only, please. Some students object to being asked to read anything that will not be on the test later. Students are also put off by “too much” outside reading that they are then tested on. A common complaint is, “There’s too much to cover!” Weekly planned quizzes are helpful to keep them studying regularly, some say. No homework would be nice, too, as well as no essays on exams. If there must be essays, let students know what the questions are, so they can study for them. “You might think this is too easy, but I learn a lot more that way,” one student advised. Another wrote, disturbingly, “Put less emphasis on essays, because writing is not one of my strong points.” Also, avoid “deadly trick” questions. A few students asked teachers to be more precise in assignments on research papers—what exactly do you want? One student wrote that “test taking is basically what college consists of.” I wonder how many others share this pinched view of their college experience.

### **Time Management:**

Students object to classes that are too hurried, that try to cram too much into too little time, and classes in which the teacher assumes a level of knowledge that students simply do not possess. On the other hand, a number of students admitted that their own

lives and schedules are harried and that they are not getting all they could out of their classes. They have jobs, family responsibilities, and other classes, which they wish teachers would keep in mind. "We're all stressed!" one wrote. Another said, "My college life would be easier and more productive if I learned to manage my time, my caffeine, and my sleep better." Yet another admitted that her college life would be more productive "if I would slow down and do homework and read."

**Presentation Style:**

Students would like classes to be stimulating, entertaining, interactive, not boring, and have short breaks when there are long lectures. "Be more visual in teaching" was one student's plea, as a reminder that today's students often are visual learners. Some said their classes need "a little more personality." More field trips would be welcomed in history classes. Ask students more frequently, "Are there any questions?" Students would add: Do not assume that we have your level of knowledge or that we automatically know something. For tough material, explain it more than one way. Remember, not everyone learns the same way. A student who is herself a teacher wrote, perceptively,

Make learning more interesting.... Break up the typical mode of teaching. Bring new ideas into the classroom to help us learn easier and quicker. When I am teaching in elementary schools, I try new ideas that get the children excited and eager to learn. Not only do they learn better, but they will remember what they've learned.

Even leaving aside the fact that she is teaching on a level much lower than we are, there might well be some wisdom here for us all.

One writer asked that every day be planned out for the entire semester: "I do better in a completely structured class." Here is one of the most disturbing comments I received, as it goes to content rather than pedagogy: "My college life would be a lot easier if teachers would only teach one thing after another, and not focus on only one thing. My zoology teacher, for example, goes on and on about evolution, while most students are uncomfortable with it." I live in a conservative part of my state, and this comment came from a student at a church-affiliated institution where I moonlight, so I should not have been too surprised. But it did make me think a lot about how students perceive their college experience. Perhaps we need to remind them occasionally that one purpose of college is to stretch them, to make them think, and to expose them to new, uncomfortable, and even slightly disturbing concepts.

**Explaining Course Requirements:**

A surprising number report that course syllabi often are not very helpful; they are "vague and unclear" as to what is expected in the course. At the very least, this should make us all take a close look at our own syllabi. Here is another one that should not

shock us: Some students simply do not understand the necessity for attendance policies. While admitting that attendance probably does affect one's grade in the end, they insist that they are paying for the course, and the decision to attend or not attend should be theirs alone, with few or no consequences. And we, the teachers, are being paid whether they show up or not, so what is it to us? Perhaps we all need to explain why we think attendance is important. Some students appreciate attendance policies that not only penalize for absences but reward for good attendance.

**Connecting with Students:**

Students have many suggestions here. Students are put off by teachers who appear arrogant and condescending. Do not be so formal; lighten up a bit. Keep your ego in check. "A certain sense of care is an unwritten requirement for teachers," commented one student. Remember, we are novices in your subject, so keep it simple and basic. As one student wrote,

We are all there to learn. Students learn from the course material and the instructor, and the instructor learns from all of the different perspectives on life that the students offer. Instructors try to hurry the lessons to cover all of the material. Sometimes, we may need to stay on one exercise a little longer so that it is understood a little more clearly. The mood in the classrooms just seems to be so stressed and formal.

Teachers should treat students like adults, not like elementary school kids. If you post office hours, then be there! Answer e-mails promptly. If you know ahead of time you will be absent and have to cancel class, send an e-mail so students can avoid wasted trips. And the most frequently cited comment: Try to remember that students are overloaded with classes and other responsibilities. Most of us, of course, know this already, but it is unclear just what we are to do with the information. One solution that a number voiced was the wish, which will never happen, that teachers would coordinate their assignments so everything (exams, papers, etc.) does not come due simultaneously.

**Miscellaneous Comments:**

These run the gamut. Three quick examples: a) "Tell us exactly what you expect us to get out of the class." b) "I don't feel like I have been challenged enough in some of my classes. I want to feel like I've really learned something in these classes instead of it all being handed to me." And c), my all-time favorite: "My college life would be a lot easier if my teachers would only teach the subjects that are absolutely necessary for life."

What we face, with a few exceptions, is a generation of students who are taking too many courses while often holding down one or more jobs at the same time; others have all this plus family responsibilities as well. Most do not want to read beyond what

is absolutely required to pass the tests. Harried as they are, they also chafe at attendance requirements. I suspect that many rarely enter their college libraries, doing their research, such as it is, on the Internet. At least some of us went through college under slightly less stressful and demanding circumstances, and I'm not sure how we bridge this gap, or even if it can be bridged. But an awareness of the constraints our students operate under can make us more sensitive and empathetic instructors, even if we do not lower our academic standards, which most certainly I am not advocating.

More broadly, we face the "customer as consumer" mindset of not only students but many of their parents as well. The attitude that "I've paid for this course, so I deserve a passing grade" is merely a facet of an unfortunate perception (reality?) that permeates American society that money can buy anything, from goods to political pull to a college degree. How faculty can counter this state of affairs is for another article, another day.

After surveying a class, I find it helpful to report back to them on the main themes of their comments (of course mentioning no names). Many opportunities for "teachable moments" will arise here when the instructor can provide guidance and advice from his or her own perspective on the challenges of navigating college. One approach is to let them know that we too faced hurdles as we made our ways through the academic maze. Students sometimes have the idea that their instructors all had an easier time of it, and diplomatically letting them know of our own struggles might give them some perspective and reassurance about their own situations.

And finally, one can, in a light-hearted way, turn the tables by telling classes, "If Students Would Only ..." and mention two or three student behaviors that would make for better classes for all and an easier time for those of us on the teaching end. My two favorites are: 1) If students would only do the reading and prepare for class beforehand, all of us would get more out of classes; and 2) If all students straight out of high school could, early on in college, make the "mental leap" that is required in that transition, and understand that they are more on their own, that they are responsible for their own learning, that we are willing to help them and want them to succeed, but that is not the same thing as spoon-feeding them. Some will figure this out early on. Some will not and will flunk out. We might welcome them back in a few years, when they and we are both older and wiser!