
**Categories:** Evaluation, Professional Development, S.O.T.L.

**Summary**

This article explores the notion that specific undergraduate characteristics might shape student perceptions of what makes for a good instructor. In particular, the authors examined how first generation students, non-traditional students, and varying class levels/experience impacted perceptions of instructor qualities. Understanding the relationship between these factors and student perceptions of instructors could help faculty understand student expectations, and thereby promote student success.

Before discussing their own studies, the authors offer a quick review of the literature on student evaluation of professors. A recent study of students in general education classes noted that students ranked the communication of ideas and information as the most important factor determining satisfaction with a class. Other studies found that instructor characteristics like being approachable, funny, caring, knowledgeable about the given course material also played significant roles in shaping student attitudes about their courses. One provocative study asked students ‘to build’ a professor; the study found that the respondents most valued enthusiasm, topic expertise, clarity of communication and presentation style, and reasonable workload. The authors also noted the construction of a model for ‘master teaching,’ by Keely, Smith, and Buskist, which utilized what they referred to as a Teacher Behaviors Checklist (TBC) to identify the ideal instructor traits expected by students. This checklist further exemplified traits by providing a series of actions/attitudes that allowed professors to meet students’ expectations in each area.

By reviewing the extent literature, the authors constructed a framework to describe student preferences that broke down into two areas, personality traits and behaviors/knowledge. In looking at who the professor is, or personality traits, the author’s framework identified empathy, the ability to build rapport, approachability, enthusiasm, and humor, as the key elements valued by students. When looking at what the professor does, or behaviors, the authors highlighted organizational skills, course design, prompt feedback, and competence and expertise as the factors that mattered the most.

Working within this framework, the authors examined whether student characteristics impacted their perceptions/ranking of these traits. Their study sought data to validate two hypothesis and two questions pertaining to the relationship between student types and perceptions of instructor qualities. The first hypothesis argued that first generation students have different perceptions of what makes a “good” professor than do non-first generation students, and therefore professors may need to spend more time with them discussing how to be successful students. The second hypothesis posited that the expectation students had for “good” professors changed as they transitioned from beginning to advanced status. The two questions that that the author’s study posed were if there was a difference
between the attitudes of traditional and non-traditional students in regards to effective professors, and did class format (face-to-face vs. online vs. hybrid) impact student expectations.

In order to test their hypothesis and answer their questions, the authors conducted a study of one hundred thirty-two voluntary student subjects at a small Midwestern university. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire and an online survey. They were also asked to provide demographic information and to submit written responses to the question, “what do you believe to be the essential qualities of a good teacher for your course.” The results derived by the authors supported neither of their hypotheses. There was no significantly significant variance in the attitudes of first-generation and non-first-generation students on the essential qualities of professors. Similarly, students’ expectations in this regard did not appear to change as they progressed from beginning to advanced stages of their education. The results did find two areas of divergence between non-traditional and traditional students, as the former placed greater value on enthusiasm and teacher responsiveness. A small but noticeable variance was identified in regards to class organization depending on the format of the course.

Conclusions

Despite suggestions by the existing literature that students of different backgrounds and different experience levels had variant perceptions of the qualities that made up a “good professor,” the study showed that divergent student groups shared the same expectations concern instructors. The data showed that despite their backgrounds or status, students strongly identified particular traits as highly valued. It was, noted the authors, surprising that the students placed little value on empathy, a finding that sharply contradicted other extent studies. Finally, the authors noted that the study had several potential methodological weaknesses, most notably the fact that seventy-six percent of the respondents were women and a large majority were white.

Applications

While the results of this study may or may not be particularly useful in informing our efforts at U.D.C., the study topic itself seems to offer promise. Has anyone every surveyed our students about the perceptions of what makes for “good” professors, or what qualities they expect out of their instructors? If not, it would seem worthwhile to attempt to do so, as it would help guide our effort to improve professional development and develop the university as a leader in the field of advanced teaching and learning. Further, conducting such a study would not only provide valuable information about our students’ needs, but also engage them in the process of institutional research and reform. Indeed, one could utilize students not only as respondents, but also as researchers.

Citations of Interest


