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Teaching Excellence

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

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Never in a Class by Themselves: An Examination of Behaviors Affecting the Student-Professor Relationship

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Teaching involves a good deal more than "just" mastering content, designing sound courses, learning techniques of instruction, and polishing presentation skills. There is a pervasive and profound social dimension to the craft of teaching. Teaching necessarily entails a relationship between faculty and students. The quality of that relationship may go a long way toward determining the outcomes of teachers' efforts. It does not require elaborate theorizing to anticipate a link between the quality of the student professor relationship and the ratings given professors on student evaluations. If students like, respect, and trust a professor, we would expect them to be disposed toward a more favorable evaluation of that professor.

Career survival is one thing, but what about the primary goal of teaching: promoting student learning? There are a variety of theoretical grounds for suspecting that a more positive student-professor relationship will lead to increased learning. Insofar as motivation plays a critical role in learning by initiating, channeling, and sustaining student efforts to learn, theoretical linkage between the quality of the student-professor relationship and motivation to learn is very important in accounting for the relevance of the student-professor relationship to learning. Students who perceive a more positive student-professor relationship and like their professors may be more motivated to learn because (a) the presence of the professor is rewarding (Uranowitz & Doyle, 1978); (b) they care more about obtaining the approval of the professor; (c) the professor de-emphasizes power over students, thereby strengthening their intrinsic motivation (Lowman, 1987); or (d) with sufficient encouragement, students feel more confident that they can attain the level of performance needed to do well in the class and be rewarded for doing so. Alternatively, Brookfield (1991) suggested that the professor who successfully instills trust is most able to encourage students to take risks in learning and to engage in critical thinking.

We conducted a survey designed to assess the extent to which students and faculty viewed particular professor behaviors as enhancing or detracting from the student-professor relationship. It was necessary to develop our own survey instrument, because although there are scales assessing related concepts such as immediacy, there is, to our knowledge, no existing instrument capturing the student-professor relationship broadly construed and with specific, behavioral items. Importantly, our survey instrument asks respondents for their views on the consequence of particular behaviors for the student-professor relationship, and not for a rating of professors in terms of the frequency with which they actually display these behaviors.

The survey was composed primarily of 46 closed-ended items. For a given professor behavior (e.g., "learns students' names quickly"), respondents were asked to indicate to what extent that behavior enhances or detracts from the student-professor relationship. Several of the items included were expected to be perceived as detracting from the student-professor relationship (e.g., "tends to look away while talking with students"). Because there is reason to believe that students respond differently to unstructured items, particularly concerning the relational aspects of teaching (Feldman, 1976), a single open-ended item also was included, asking students to give their "view of the most important thing that a professor can do in order to have a good relationship with students." Students and faculty responded to the same survey, with the only difference being the background information requested. It was necessary to rely upon convenience, rather than random, samples of students and faculty. Undergraduate students from 10 classes throughout the university, with majors in 41 different departments, were surveyed. The principal sources of faculty respondents were a mailing list of some 200 faculty currently or previously associated with the Teaching Scholars Program (a university teaching effectiveness pro-

gram) and about 25 faculty in attendance at a particular teaching effectiveness workshop. These procedures yielded 295 undergraduate and 116 faculty respondents.

We identified a number of differences in views of what is important to the student-professor relationship, both among types of students and between students and faculty. Although these differences do not militate against cautious generalization, it is likely that the specific behaviors most conducive to a positive student-professor relationship will differ somewhat depending upon the sex and major of students. Differences in response by sex, with female students consistently perceiving professor behaviors as more important to the student-professor relationship than male students, were quite evident. Although the differences were not as pronounced as those between faculty and students, they suggest that female students may be especially attuned and sensitive to behaviors affecting the student-professor relationship. In the educational context, Baxter Magolda (1992) argued that female students are more likely to utilize ways of knowing that are interpersonal in nature, as opposed to the individualistic approaches favored by male students. Undoubtedly, women also have been subjected to sexist behaviors by teachers in the course of their educational experiences. Female students' greater concern with the student-professor relationship may reflect a resulting need for reassurance that they will be treated fairly and respectfully.

Differences in response also were evident across majors. Fine Arts students' emphasis on a flexible, close, peer-like relationship may be due to the particular nature of their work: ongoing projects, a larger than usual dose of ambiguity in evaluation, and, perhaps, a more personal involvement with the output. Possibly owing to their professional socialization, Education majors also were apt to rate professor behaviors as important to the student-professor relationship. The lesser expectations of undeclared majors were interesting and may reflect a view that lack of commitment to a major does not entitle one to expect as much of professors.

We were puzzled by the lack of differentiation in views across class years. Feldman (1976) offered the empirical generalization that first- and second-year students place somewhat more emphasis on instructor fairness and ability to get along with students. Notions that students develop cognitively over the course of their college careers (Baxter Magolda, 1992)

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also imply differing viewpoints across year in school. Yet, that is not what we found. The simplest explanation may be that most of the behaviors we asked about are rudimentary enough that they fail to reflect the more subtle changes in expectations of the student-professor relationship concomitant with cognitive development during the college years.

Students consistently rated more highly those behaviors related to reduced social distance and greater flexibility on the part of professors, while faculty respondents emphasized behaviors related to fairness in evaluation and to their core pedagogical function. Without overdrawing the contrast, students leaned toward a vision of the student-professor relationship as easygoing, familiar, and accommodating, whereas professors contemplated a relationship marked by fair dealing, clarity of expectations, and a strong commitment to learning by both parties. Thus, although the findings of this study do not portray a faculty out of touch with students, the perspectives of students and faculty were sufficiently divergent that well-intentioned efforts by the latter might miss the mark in improving the student-professor relationship.

The broadest practical implication of this study is the evidence it provides that students really do care about many of the "little" things teachers do (or fail to do). Although solid course content and clear, enthusiastic communication are likely what students want from teachers first and foremost, students also want to be treated fairly, to be cared about as individuals, to be dealt with in an accommodating manner, and to have faculty they can trust and respect. The chance that a professor will sour students' educational experiences by not adequately attending to these matters appears larger for female students and for students in programs where a close working relationship is essential, rather than merely desirable. It is clear that student desires in terms of the student-professor relationship are not so transparent to faculty as to render them purely a matter of common sense, requiring no particular attention.

Problems may arise, however, in attempting to improve the student-professor relationship. For one thing, fairness, caring, flexibility, and trustworthiness sometimes present conflicting demands. Fairness, for example, typically entails consistency and universality in dealing with students, whereas flexibility calls for individualized, case-by-case determinations. Flexible accommodation also may undermine trustworthiness, as the instructor is seen as not following through on established policies and procedures. Similarly, rapport may be enhanced by admitting to mistakes and lack of expertise, but possibly at the price of one's credibility (particularly early in the relationship) (Brookfield, 1991).

A more basic source of problems is that, although we have focused exclusively upon professor behaviors as a determinant of the quality of the student-professor relationship, that relationship is, in fact, a two-way street. In the context of this study, it made sense to focus

on one side of the relationship, because professors' own behavior is the most controllable and because considering varieties of student behavior would have introduced inordinate complexity into the analysis. Nevertheless, it is evident that students are not unfailingly polite, reasonable, trustworthy, and, occasionally, even likable. Even if professors accept as part of their role as professionals the responsibility to work around these things, student failure to reciprocate considerate treatment clearly renders the job of maintaining a positive relationship far more problematic.

It also should be recognized that a number of conditions conducive to mutually satisfactory, fulfilling social relationships are absent or only marginally present in the college setting. The evident desire of students to be treated more like peers or relative equals to professors conflicts with the reality that professors know more about the subject at hand, have the primary responsibility for designing and implementing courses, bear the burden of evaluating students (students get their turn at the end when the course is already over), and generally manifest far greater commitment to the learning process. These and other differences between faculty and students are not insurmountable obstacles or justifications for authoritarian approaches to education, but neither can they be overlooked. Given the objective differences in the roles of faculty and students and what is brought to these roles, it is not surprising that faculty respondents had more qualms about embracing the proposition that students be treated as equals. Consider also that relationships with students are rather time-limited (typically "one-semester stands") and that, even under the envious circumstance of small classes, there are many more students than professors. Large numbers of students, limited time for relationships to develop, and relational partners on unequal footing—all of which typify the college setting—are scarcely optimal conditions for the development of quality social relationships.

A better student-professor relationship, then, is eminently attainable, but there are obstacles that have to be acknowledged and dealt with. Improving relations with students is not only a matter of employing certain behaviors, but also of deciding what kind of relationship would be most appropriate and eliciting more responsible, considerate behavior from students. Professors are never "in a class by themselves." There is a profound social dimension to teaching that we, as professors, need to give greater attention. Apart from our skill in arranging and conveying knowledge, our actions toward students enhance or detract from our relationships with them. The consequences of this behavior affect both our careers and our ability to help students learn.

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