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Exploring Student Expectations

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For several years we have worked with faculty members to explore what they need to know about students in order to empower them as learners and what students need to know to become self-regulating scholars. By "self-regulating scholars" we mean students who pursue academic goals as active learners and diligent inquirers. The move toward active learning and to assigning students greater responsibility for their learning may often, however, be at odds with their expectations. Why would students accept new and more onerous roles without explanation, encouragement, and assistance when they have previously been successful using traditional approaches to learning? Working with faculty to clarify their expectations and those of their students and exploring how to guide students to become more self-directed thus seem to us important steps toward supporting effective learning in the classroom. We have invited faculty members to discuss a series of questions in a structured inquiry format. They rarely have the opportunity to test the myths and legends that have grown up around student attitudes, or to examine their own. Clarifying the distance between where students are and where faculty would like them to be has led our participants to practical suggestions about how better to convey their goals to students. Here we would like to share some of the most common observations and suggestions of our workshop participants.

We begin by asking if participants think their students arrive with clear goals.

The consensus in our workshops is that, while some students come to college with clear career goals, many do not. Instead they harbor broad and general aspirations such as finding a life or narrower personal goals such as getting good grades, landing a well-paying job, or finding a special person. One faculty member said the dominant student aim at her institution was to obtain a pre-wealth degree. Few students articulate goals that display intellectual drive, the willingness to indulge in inquiry for its own sake that we associate with scholarship. Learning for these students is not an end in itself. These sample faculty observations match evidence from studies on reasons for attending college (Astin, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While disconcerting, they are consistent.

Given such broad aims, students could be expected to define their role as students equally broadly. Yet faculty perceive more focus here. For the career oriented, footpaths to the future are clearly laid out. For others, the dominant role is to be present, although passive, in class. Such passivity may reflect their developmental stage as dualists - assuming that knowledge is absolute (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1970) and expecting to acquire that knowledge from their teachers. They do not expect to read or inquire on their own. One faculty member characterized them as hoop jumpers although they may challenge or question their teachers. Faculty see their students for the most part as not inclined to become active, responsible learners.

With the perceptions of students' goals and roles clearly articulated, we then invite faculty to discuss what this means for the roles students assign to them.

Faculty perceptions of their students' expectations of them correspond with students' roles and have little to do with promoting independent inquiry. Faculty report that students see them as supplying a service that students consume. Some faculty suggest that they are expected to act in loco parentis and that they are under pressure to become de facto social workers since so many students have problems. Other faculty roles have political implications - students perceive them to be gatekeepers and task masters, in both instances oppressive authorities.

More positive perceptions are that they may be assigned the role of teaching students how to learn and of instigating learning outside of class. Yet nowhere in the suggested faculty roles have we heard mention of modeling scholarship or introducing students to their discipline.

We therefore ask the faculty members to trade experiences about student behavior - what is going on in their lives.

Some things have changed from when faculty were students. E-mail is endemic. Three o'clock in the morning is the peak library call-in time in one university. In another, 80 percent of students work more than 20 hours per week, and students often commute up to three hours a day. The vision is of just-in-time learning, and students' time is consumed by crises. One participant commented that students must choose among school, work, sleep, and social life but have time for only two of the three. This image of students is far from the scholarly life of devotion to studies.

We therefore ask participants to discuss how students should be spending their time and what they tell students about time management.

Faculty say that some things have not changed. Students still need to spend two hours out of class studying for each hour in class. Our workshop participants recognized their responsibility to explain to students how much reading time was needed for assignments, and they suggested the need to inquire of their peers how many assignments students were being given in other courses. One participant described inviting students to estimate the time per week required for a grade of A, B, or C, so that they could plan accordingly. It was also deemed important to tell students that their time should not all be spent studying but also on socializing and maintaining physical health. The final suggestion was to tell students that they will have to make choices.

We then invite faculty members to discuss how to promote a community of learners.

We witnessed two lines of thought in discussion about how to

develop a learning community. The first focused on students. The primary point was that the more time we spend allowing students to get to know us, the more readily and easily they will participate as active learners in their education.

The second line of thought concerned what we should be doing as members of our scholarly community. Checking across courses for competing demands and establishing the feasibility of fulfilling the curriculum, then setting guidelines is one major recommendation. Faculty mentoring across or within departments, usually extending over two years, was suggested to aid faculty in dealing with their roles. One person suggested that a question in teaching evaluations to faculty might read: "What have you done that has changed the teaching of someone else?" Participants noted that attempts to create a learning community were constrained by a zero sum merit pay system where faculty compete with each other.

The emphasis placed on what needs to be done within the academy to create a learning community suggests that the point of leverage lies among us as faculty.

We then return to the question of what we need to let students know to become self-regulating scholars.

The chief finding is that most students do not see learning as transforming. They expect to graduate as the same person, only with more knowledge. Faculty made several recommendations for dealing with this attitude. The first was to help students specify their goals and to understand that postsecondary learning is a transformative experience, that is, that they can expect to change in many ways while in college. A more direct approach was to ask students the question: "What can you do to improve your own learning?" There was a consensus that assessment must match course content since the evaluation of learning determines or limits students' learning goals. Participants suggested introducing students to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy or Perry's (1981) scheme of academic development, and then showing them the study skills such development requires. Empathic advising and creating a situation where students know from the first day that they will be teaching each other set the scene for empowering students as learners.

Conclusion Our exploration of faculty perceptions about students has opened a realm of discussion that faculty tell us they have not experienced before. As faculty members, we rarely take the time to study the context within which we must operate, yet we must create a context that will allow us to succeed. This exploration is a beginning point for determining the relationship of the many factors that affect how we work and how we will be able to get our message across.

The central point that has emerged is the need to clarify expectations of both faculty and students and for faculty to present a rationale for the kind of learning they expect students to undertake. This may seem obvious. Yet the evidence of our participants is that it all too seldom happens. If faculty explain their goals and explain why they are asking students to assume more responsibility for their learning than they may have taken in the past, and then show them how to assume this responsibility, we may achieve more than we thought possible. This insight into the learning context may be the most important teaching we do.

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