

# THE ATTITUDES OF TRADITIONAL STUDENTS TOWARDS CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to assess the attitudes and perceptions of 200 traditional college students towards classroom instruction. The "product" in higher education is supposedly produced and delivered by well-trained professors who are assumed to "know" what is the best "product" to produce, and how best to communicate it. Given the paucity of research on what students consider to be good instruction, this present research was conducted. Overall, the research revealed that these traditional students have definite ideas of what they consider desirable classroom experience.

## INTRODUCTION

The 1980s brought about a new and challenging environment for institutions of higher learning in the United States. According to the projections of the Carnegie Council on Higher Education and the Bureau of the Census declining enrollments in higher education were projected throughout the 1980s and are expected to continue in the 1990s [Carnegie Council 1980] [U.S. Dept. of Education 1982].

In response to the challenges of a dwindling market and intense competition, most colleges and universities began their experimentation with the marketing approach. These institutions embarked on extensive market research programs and increased their reliance on generated information to formulate strategy and communicate more effectively with their publics.

Almost a decade since the marketing philosophy was first introduced to higher learning, the concept remains of little use in higher education. Much of the market research conducted by the industry has so far focused on identifying approaches to attract more students to a particular school or major. "Enrollment strategies" are what marketing seems to boil down to in higher education. Several researchers have conducted proprietary as well as academic research on factors influencing the student's choice of a specific career or university [Williams 1980] [Prasad and Murphy 1989] [Chapman 1981] [Hosler and Gallagher 1987] [Kellaris and Kellaris 1988] [Razzouk, et al. 1985]. This information is then used in developing segmentation and positioning strategies for a specific institution.

Beyond their involvement in enrollment management and institutional positioning, most colleges and universities operate with a profound "product orientation." The concept of customer retention and satisfaction appears totally neglected. The "product" in higher education is supposedly produced and

delivered by well-trained professors who are assumed to "know" what is the best "product" to produce, and how best to communicate it. Given the paucity of research on what students consider to be good instruction, this present research was conducted. More specifically, the study sought to assess the needs and perceptions of a sample of traditional students towards various aspects of classroom instruction.

Traditional college students are those 24 years old and younger who are enrolled full-time and have had no interruption in their schooling since graduating from high school [Stewart and Rue 1983]. The focus on traditional students in this study is warranted due to the existing potential in this segment if the dropout rate among high school graduates is reduced. Also, because of the increased interest in non-traditional students due to their growing numbers, traditional students have been understudied in recent years.

## THE STUDY

A self-administered questionnaire was developed and distributed to 375 students enrolled at a State supported Southern California university. Daytime and nighttime classes were randomly selected from the departments of mathematics, English, history, business administration, communication, and science. Instructors were asked to allow their students to complete the questionnaire either at home or during class time.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections. Section one contained five open-ended questions designed to elicit "top of the mind" responses to questions related to the effectiveness of professors, favorite format of classroom instruction, effective exams, course assignments, and overall effective classroom instruction. Their responses were grouped into either affective, cognitive, or a combination of affective and cognitive categories. Sections two and three asked students to respond to various characteristics of professors and instructional methods using a five point Likert scale ranging from "extremely desirable" to "not desirable." Sections four and five asked students to respond to statements about assignments and exams using a five point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The last section asked questions pertaining to demographics and factors used to categorize nontraditional and traditional students.

Two hundred responses were characterized as those of traditional students (under 25 years old, full-time enrollment, and continuous schooling) and these were included in the study. The majority of these respondents were single (80.5%) and white (61.5%). The median income range of the group was

\$15,000-\$24,999, with 15% reporting earning \$50,000 and above. Approximately 85% were undergraduate students.

## THE RESULTS

The first part of the questionnaire was aimed at measuring salient attributes of five aspects of classroom instruction. Table 1 shows the distribution of the general types of qualifiers used by the respondents in describing an effective professor, favorite format of classroom instruction, an effective exam, preferred course assignments, and overall classroom instruction. Affective attributes were significantly more associated with an effective teacher than cognitive or combined attributes. Qualifiers such as "believes in his/her students," "open for suggestions from students," "welcomes student questions," "willing to work with students," "takes time to get to know students," "teaches without prejudice," and "relates to students' needs" were very dominant among the attributes of an effective professor.

TABLE 1  
Salient Attributes of Classroom Instruction

	Affective	Cognitive	Combined
An effective professor	50.5	24.5	19.5
Favorite format of instruction	19.0	58.5	6.0
An effective exam	7.5	82.0	2.0
Preferred assignments	9.0	70.0	10.5
Overall effective instruction	25.5	42.5	17.0

As the favored format of classroom instruction, cognitive qualifiers were the most dominant (58.5%). Responses such as "a question and answer session," "one in which the teacher lectures but is open for questions," and "lecture and discussion" were frequently cited. The affective responses included "relaxed, not overly structured," "small groups working together," and "one that involves interaction between professor and student and student to student." Moreover, cognitive qualifiers were more frequently cited for an effective exam, course assignments and overall effective classroom instruction.

Next the students rated 23 professor-related characteristics. The students were asked to indicate how desirable they felt each of the characteristics is on a scale of one (Extremely Desirable) to five (Not Desirable). The highest desirability rating (Extremely Desirable) was given to a professor who "knows the subject matter well" (85%; Mean=1.1), followed by those who have "ability to stimulate interest in the subject" (78%; Mean=1.2) and who "allow questions during lecture" (58.5%; Mean=1.5) and who "are friendly with students" (53.5%; Mean=1.6). On the other hand, the least desirable characteristics (Not Desirable) were "calling on specific students to answer questions in class" (22%; Mean=3.7), "do not require attendance" (20.5%; Mean=3.2), "not bothered by students' tardiness" (16.5%; Mean=3.2), "are involved in

consulting and other business" (15.5%; Mean=3.2), "involved in academic research and publishing" (7.5%; Mean=3.2), and "have a Doctorate degree" (9%; Mean=3.1). The last two here are of significant interest since most colleges and universities often list them as major selling points to prospective students.

On the subject of course assignments, students rated 12 course-related characteristics on a scale of one (Strongly Agree) to five (Strongly Disagree). They favor (Strongly Agree/Agree) selecting their own topic for their term projects (81%; Mean=1.8), and definitely agree that "professors should provide students with samples of major assignments" (76.5%; Mean=1.9) and that "professors provide answers to all homework assignments" (83%; Mean=1.8). A strong rejection (Disagree/Strongly Disagree) was reported for the two statements: "It is not necessary for a professor to return my graded term project" (91%; Mean=4.6) and "It is not necessary for a professor to return my homework" (87.5%; Mean=4.3). Students also registered their relative displeasure with oral class presentation (45.5%; Mean 3.4) and with participation in group projects (31.5%; Mean=2.8).

What do these traditional students desire in the area of instructional methods? Students rated 12 instruction method-related characteristics on a scale of one (Extremely Desirable) to five (Not Desirable). They have high desirability (Extremely Desirable/Very Desirable) for "review sessions before exams" (88%; Mean=1.5) and "use of a combination of instructional methods" (83.5%; Mean=1.7). However, the least desirable (Not Desirable) characteristics of instructional methods were "limiting lectures to textbook material only" (29.5%; Mean=3.7), "regular use of overhead transparencies" (28%; Mean 3.8), and "requiring students to use computers as instructional aids" (22%; Mean=3.3). This group of respondents appreciate a variety of instructional methods and any assistance they can receive in the course. They are not, however, very excited about the rigidity of overhead transparencies or the inconvenience that some associated with a required use of computers in any particular course.

Lastly, students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a scale of one (Strongly Agree) to five (Strongly Disagree) with 15 additional statements on exams and grading. They were in strong agreement with the statement that "review sessions are necessary before exams" (88.5%; Mean=1.6). Other statements that received support by over 50% of the respondents were "results of mid-term exams should be discussed in the classroom" (67.5%; Mean=2.2), "professors should have some latitude for subjective grading" (71%; Mean=2.1), "class participation should factor into the final grade" (55.5%; Mean=2.5), and "I believe that occasional unannounced quizzes force students to keep up on class material" (56.5%; Mean=2.7).

While none of the statements received 50% disagreement, several statements had a disagreement ratio of 35% and over. Close to 49% disagreed with the statement that "No student circumstances warrant special grading consideration" (48.5%;

Mean=3.4), suggesting that teachers should show some flexibility and consideration for a student's circumstances. Also, over 45% rejected the idea that "grades should be based on a straight percentage" (45.5%; Mean=3.3). Interestingly enough, over 40% disagreed with the statement that "final exams should be optional" (47%; Mean=3.2), and rejected the idea of a comprehensive final exam (41.5%; Mean=3.4). Many students (47%; Mean=2.8) were neutral regarding take-home exams, with slightly over one third of the students favoring take-home exams (34%; Mean=2.8).

#### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to assess the attitudes and perceptions of traditional college students towards classroom instruction. Overall, the research revealed that these traditional students have definite ideas of what they consider desirable classroom experience.

As expected they desire an effective professor who knows his/her subject matter well and can stimulate interest in the subject. Beyond these two cognitive characteristics, the students desired a flexible, friendly and caring teacher who listens to students' thoughts and comments and counsels students outside of class. These exhortative characteristics should appear more often in university bulletins and promotional material. Ironically, such attributes as having a Doctorate degree or being involved in academic research or consulting, which are often heralded in promotion material, appear to be of less desirability for these traditional students. Obviously, it is not only the minority students who expressed their desire for "affective" attributes of professors. The majority of respondents who were White Caucasians were just as expressive in their desire for more friendly and caring professors.

Since most instructional experiences incorporate course assignments of one type or another, the respondents were asked to assess their attitudes towards a variety of assignment-related characteristics. Students once again favored a flexible system in which they are allowed to select their own term projects. The majority also expect professors to provide examples of course assignments and to return graded assignments. These students are not excited about either oral presentations or group projects. If such group projects are to be assigned, the students recommend that they be optional.

It may be rather impossible to design course assignments that would please everyone; however, it is obvious that some flexibility is definitely called for in this regard. This age group may be somewhat shy and thus does not appreciate required oral presentations or rigid group projects. However, there is a need for students to develop their oral presentation skills, despite their shyness or not wanting to do so. Teachers could score points with such professional practices as returning graded homework and assignments, providing samples of good and bad assignments and allowing students to choose from among a variety of assignment alternatives that could satisfy the objectives of the course. Where oral exams are deemed

necessary, it is important that the professor recognizes the emotional stress the practice may cause students, and thus give students clear instructions on what is expected of them, and allow them ample time to prepare.

In the area of actual instruction, professors should experiment with a variety of options. Most students favor the lecture format especially if it is combined with a class discussion. Also, occasional use of videos and guest lectures was considered desirable, but not the regular use of overhead transparencies. While the regular use of overheads may add to the organization ratings of instruction, it tends to limit the professor's flexibility and ability to interact with students. Of significance, also, is the relatively large number (29.5%) who find as undesirable the practice of limiting lectures to textbook material only.

The implications of these results to classroom instruction are significant. Variety and flexibility must be maintained. Professors who get carried away with their use of audio, video and computerized aids may not be winning many students' hearts or minds. Course syllabi should be reviewed to ensure that some of the desirable instructional characteristics are incorporated in the learning experience in both words and deeds.

Last, in the area of exams and grading, students do not find exams totally useless. In fact, a large number of students admit that unannounced exams or quizzes force students to keep up on the material, and that final exams are necessary for evaluating students. Accepting this fact, these students go on to suggest that final exams need not be comprehensive, yet preferably, they should not be optional. On grading, the students are willing to allow professors some degree of subjectivity and flexibility in assigning grades. Consideration for student circumstances is desirable and so is feedback from the evaluation process.

In summary, the group of traditional students surveyed in this research appear very logical and fair in their assessment of a desirable educational experience. Institutions of higher learning could benefit from this research by selecting professors who could develop delivery, communication, and evaluation systems that are in line with the expectation of their customers—the students. It is obvious that students demand more than a professor having a great knowledge of the subject matter. Teachers must learn, whether at school or through special training, about the needs and perceptions of their customers, the students. Doctoral programs in the U.S. have traditionally prepared their graduates for the laboratory and not the classroom [Jackson and Razzouk 1981]. Some changes must be made in this area to enhance the marketing activities of higher education.

Traditional students are becoming an extinct species as the number of nontraditionals keep invading today's classrooms. As small as their numbers may become, these traditional students remain the backbone of undergraduate education, and accordingly, their interests must be assessed and attended to. This research was one attempt at achieving this goal. More research in this area is useful. Also comparative studies between

traditional and nontraditional students could be of great benefit to any institution of higher learning.

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