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FACETS Assessment Report: Classroom Expectations and Experiences of College Students

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The purpose of this document is to provide a brief report of recent survey findings on the expectations and experiences of college students. An online survey at a medium-sized regional university asked college freshmen and seniors to rate the extent to which they expected to engage in broad categories of classroom activities (e.g., speaking in classes, presenting material, etc.). A parallel assessment asked faculty to rate the extent to which they expect their students to perform behaviors in these same broad categories. Results show shifts in expectations from freshmen to seniors and disjunctures between students and faculty. These findings are presented as a first step toward a global understanding of student and faculty expectations about broad categories of classroom activities.

Although university and college faculty are masters of their content, many may be at a point of deep concern and frustration because their historic array of traditional pedagogical practices, ones that used to be successful, no longer work. Even faculty recognized for teaching excellence may find it difficult to understand the learning needs, and the attitudinal and perceptual differences of new students, especially as many students fail to respond positively to lecture or discussion formats. Instructors' insufficiencies in awareness and understanding have the potential to create deep rifts between the academic expectations of incoming students, and the perceived effectiveness of post-secondary teaching.

We think that there are many issues at play here, not the least of which are differences in expectations about learning and instructional currency between students and faculty. The purpose of this document is to provide a brief report of recent survey findings on the expectations and experiences of college students. These findings are presented as a first step toward a global understanding of student and faculty expectations about broad categories of classroom activities (e.g., speaking in classes, presenting material, etc.).

Method

All participants of the study were students or faculty at the same medium-sized regional university. Participants were randomly selected from among all freshmen, seniors, and faculty at the university and were contacted via email. Assessments were conducted within the first five weeks of the fall semester.

For the student sample, 377 (of 394) incoming freshmen respondents and 423 (of 437) senior respondents provided complete data. Response rates were 43% and 35% for freshmen and seniors respectively. The sample was predominately Caucasian (94%) and female (66%). The majority of students (75%) were from small towns (<50,000 people), a size highly characteristic of the geographic region. Finally, many students reported that the largest class size they faced in high school was either no larger than 30 students (43%) or between 30 and 50 students (25%).

Following a brief demographic questionnaire, students were asked to indicate how much time they expected to be engaged in 14 different broad categories of classroom activities:

1. listening in a large lecture,
2. listening in a small lecture or discussion section,
3. speaking/discussing in a lecture section,
4. observing class demonstrations,
5. observing in the field,
6. following procedures in a lab or studio,
7. designing/planning in a lab or studio,
8. speaking/discussing in a small group,
9. presenting reports/information to a class,
10. enacting simulations or role playing,
11. analyzing case studies,
12. independent study or research,
13. collaborating with others outside of class,
14. performing internships or teaching.

Students were asked to choose from the following four time options for each category: no time (1), some time (2), significant time (3), and most time (4).

For sake of comparison, 94 faculty members were also surveyed. The faculty response rate was 26%.

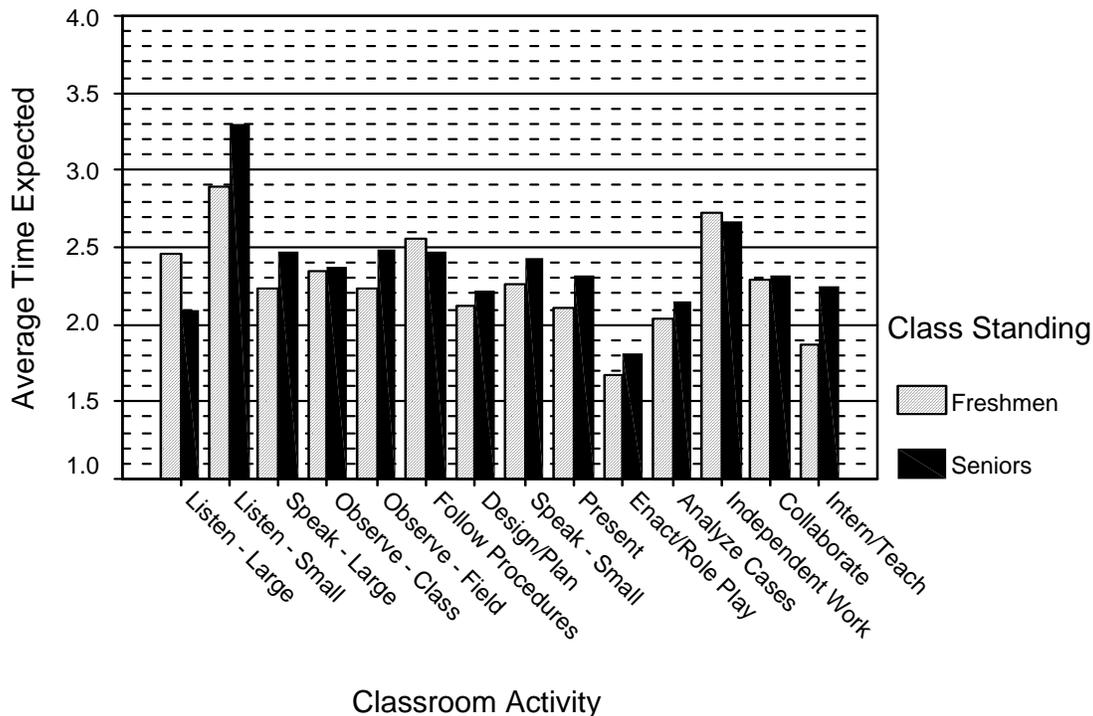
Faculty were provided with a parallel set of questions, asking how much time they spent doing the same 14 activities (rather than their expectations). Faculty were asked to rate each activity twice, once for their freshmen level courses and once for their senior level courses.

The ratings were subjected to a series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) models. While meritorious arguments can be made against the use of ANOVA models on data derived using 4-point rating scales, parallel nonparametric analyses were conducted where possible. In such cases, nearly identical conclusions were drawn, possibly because of the sufficiently large sample sizes. We retained the ANOVA models for several primary reasons: greater intuitive understanding of averages, availability of complex (factorial) representations of data, and the availability of planned statistical comparisons.

Summary of Student Expectations

Figure 1 summarizes the average ratings produced by the student sample on the 14 broad categories of classroom activities. Statistically, a 2 (class standing) x (14) (classroom activity) mixed-factor ANOVA indicated significant differences in average time expected for all activities between freshmen and seniors, $F(1,798)= 8.239, p<.001$, and significant differences in expectations among the 14 classroom activities, $F(13,10374)=178.053, p<.001$.

Figure 1: Expectations of University Students



CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In general, both freshmen and senior students expected to spend the most time listening in small classes, and the ratings associated with this were significantly higher than all other classroom activity ratings. Second most expected was independent work and third most expected was following procedures; each of these were significantly higher than all other activities (with the exception of listening small classes). Student were least likely to expect to enact simulations or engage in role playing, an activity which scored significantly lower than all other for both freshmen and seniors.

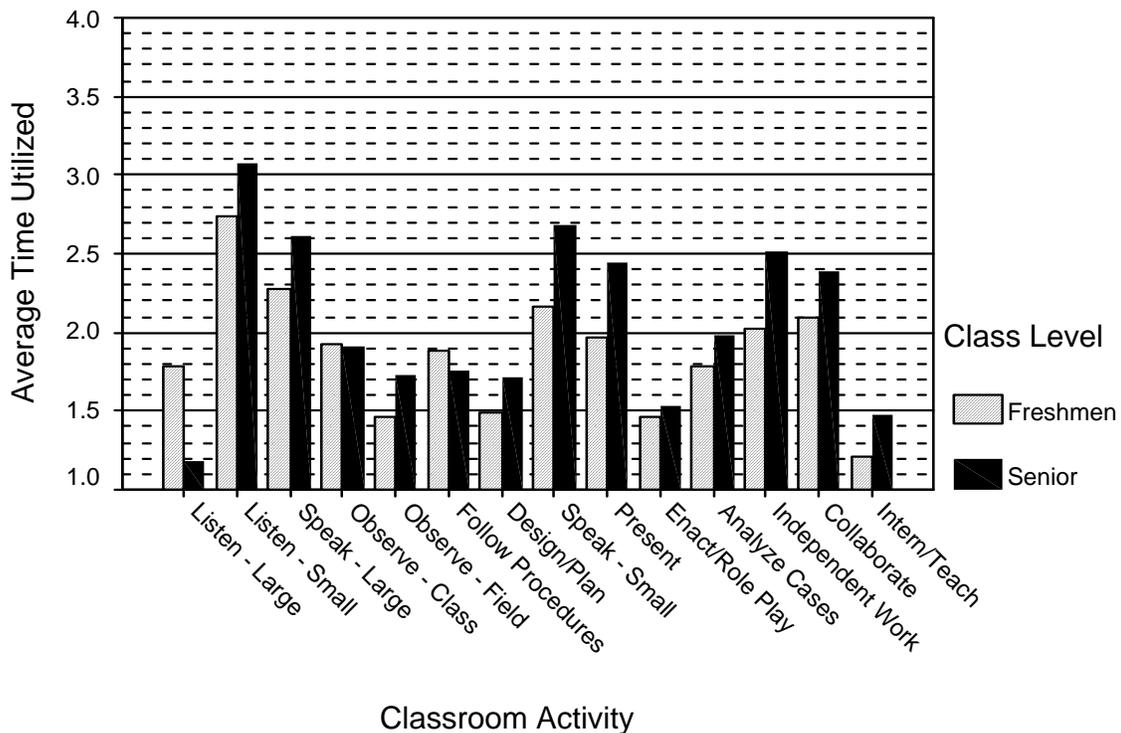
Perhaps more importantly, a significant interaction among the two variables emerged, $F(13,10374)=17.756$, $p<.001$, indicating that the expectation levels for the various activities were not the same for freshman and seniors. Comparisons of average expected time spent on each activity showed that seniors expected to spend significantly less time listening in large classes and significantly more time listening in small classes, speaking in large classes, observing in the field, speaking in small classes, and presenting reports or information to a class (all differences significant at $ps<.01$). All other differences were not statistically significant ($ps>.05$).

Summary of Faculty Practices

Figure 2 summarizes the average ratings produced by the faculty sample. Recall that the faculty completed the ratings twice, once for their freshman level courses and once for their senior level courses. Statistically, a (2) (class level) x (14) (classroom activity) completely within-factor ANOVA indicated significant differences between freshmen and senior level courses, $F(1,69)=26.637$, $p<.001$, and significant differences in amount of time spent on the 14 classroom activities, $F(13,57)=36.238$, $p<.001$.

In general, faculty reported that students were significantly more likely to be expected to listen in small classes as compared to all other activities. Next most common, students at each level were expected to speak in large classes, speak in small classes, present information to classes, work independently, and work together outside of classes. All other activities formed a third, least-likely cluster. Generally, activities were rated significantly different from activities outside of their clusters ($ps<.01$) but not significantly different from each other within clusters ($ps>.05$).

Figure 2: Practices of Faculty in Classes



Perhaps more importantly, a significant interaction among the two variables emerged, $F(13,57)=5.740$, $p<.001$, indicating that faculty did not spend the same amount of time on each activity for freshmen versus senior level courses. Significant differences emerged on five different activities. Faculty reported that they spent less time requiring seniors to listen in large sections as compared to freshmen. However, faculty reported that seniors spend more time than freshmen speaking in large classes, speaking in small classes, presenting material, and doing independent work (all differences significant at $ps<.01$). All other differences were not statistically significant ($ps>.05$).

Comparing Student Expectations to Faculty Practices

Another way to view this material is to compare student expectations with actual faculty practices. This provides evidence of a disjuncture between students and faculty. Here the means presented in Figures 1 and 2 are again useful.

In comparing faculty practices in freshmen level courses to freshmen expectations, it is important to note that faculty in general rated the various activities as significantly less likely than freshmen expected, $F(1,452)=72.834$, $p<.001$. It is important to note that these ratings varied according to activity, $F(13,440)=8.411$, $p<.001$. Specifically, the inflated freshmen expectations were particularly pronounced for speaking in large classes, observing in class, observing in the field, following procedures, designing and planning, analyzing cases, independent study, and internships/student teaching (all differences were significant at $ps<.01$). All other differences were not statistically significant ($ps>.05$).

In comparing faculty practices in senior level courses to senior reports, it was similarly found that faculty in general rated the various activities as significantly less likely than seniors reported, $F(1,501)=41.995$, $p<.001$. This finding was also tempered by the fact that the differences varied according to classroom activity, $F(13,489)=15.967$, $p<.001$. Interestingly, seniors were more likely to expect to speak in large classes, observe in class, observe in the field, follow procedures, design and plan, and speak in small classes (all differences significant at $ps<.01$). All other differences were not statistically significant ($ps>.05$).

Discussion

These data provide some insight to broad differences in student expectations and faculty classroom practices. The results show that students enter into college with definite expectations about what types of activities college classes tend to include. The source of these expectations is a matter beyond the current study.

Importantly, students' expectations do change over the course their academic careers. And typically, these changes map onto the types of activities faculty tend to emphasize in their classes. Certainly both sources of data reflect an academic trend away from passive activities in relatively anonymous situations – such as listening in large lectures – to more active learning in senior level courses.

The average differences between senior reports (expectations) and faculty practices may be particularly troubling. Clearly, the seniors and faculty in this study do not have congruous views of senior level courses. Whether this reflects methodological problems of the study (such as sampling problems) or reflects differences in perceptions among students and faculty is difficult to determine. Future research may wish to address this issue.

At the highest level of generalization, these data speak to relevance and effectiveness of post-secondary teaching methods. Right now, many university faculty members may be questioning their abilities as teachers, not because they lack the potential skills or talents to be good teachers, but because they may not know how or why they are failing to reach current audiences. This problem is, of course, intricate and compounded by many factors, but perhaps exacerbated by differences in collegiate expectations held by emerging generations of students and faculty. Whether the problem is extreme as a passé academic teaching paradigm or, at the other end of the continuum, naïvete and eroding capabilities of students is certainly open to debate. Certainly the emphasis needs to be on finding an academic model that achieves its goal – the education of the student.