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STUDENT SHOWCASE

Do Students and Professors Agree on the Attributes That Make Up a Good Community College Professor?

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Abstract

Common terms used by students to describe a good professor, especially on websites like ratemyprofessor.com, a website that allows students to rate their professors, include “understanding,” “nice,” “engaging,” “lenient,” and “kind,” all of which are indicators of a popular attitude known as student consumerism. As a consequence, some may say that student’s perspectives concerning the qualities that make up a good professor are to be taken with a grain of salt. However, evidence from surveyed students and professors shows that the majority of both community college students and professors agree that the most important qualities of a good professor are “caring” or “understanding,” “engaging,” and “knowledgeable” about the source material.

Keywords: *student perceptions; student consumerism; teacher quality*

Introduction

Common terms used by students to describe a good professor, especially on websites like ratemyprofessor.com, include “understanding,” “nice,” “engaging,” “lenient,” and “kind,” all of which are indicators of a popular attitude known as student consumerism. As a consequence, some may say that students’ perspectives concerning the qualities that make up a good professor are to be taken with a grain of salt. According to Treadgold (2016), student consumerism is “the widespread attitude that students are ‘consumers’ who need to be kept happy with the ‘product’ that they are buying from their professors – which they believe is an enjoyable experience taking the course, not a rigorous education.” The rise of student consumerism supposedly affects professors’ ability to challenge students because professors become more likely to pander to the “consumer” by being a “nice,” “understanding,” or “caring” professor. According to Treadgold (2016), this interaction impedes professors from being good professors. But what is a “good” professor?

A professor who is described by students as “nice,” “caring,” or “understanding,” could be a professor who is an easy grader rather than good teacher, but is a “good”

professor simply one who will not pander to student affection? That is, are qualities like “nice,” “caring,” or “understanding” wanted by students because a professor demonstrating these qualities is more likely to give a passing grade? Or are qualities such as these signs of something else? Evidence from surveyed students and professors shows that the majority of both community college students and professors agree that the most important qualities of a good professor are “caring” or “understanding,” “engaging,” and “knowledgeable.” The notion that students and professors agree on the attributes that make up a good professor suggests that qualities like “caring,” “understanding,” and “engaging” cannot be linked with the negative effects of student consumerism because one can safely assume that professors do not believe that a good professor is simply an easy grading professor.

Methodology

This project consisted of library research that compared what students and professors said about the qualities of a good professor, as well as analysis of peer-reviewed social science research on higher education. Surveys were created and distributed to forty-one San Diego Miramar College students and fifteen San Diego Miramar College professors. The survey for students asked two questions: “What are the five most important qualities of a community college professor?” and “What five things do you hope to take away from a class?” For both questions, five blank spaces were given and students were tasked with filling in the blanks with their own words. Then, students were asked to assign a percentage of importance to each quality adding up to one hundred percent. The survey for professors asked two similar questions: “What are the five most important qualities of a community college professor?” and “What five things do you hope your students learn from taking one of your classes?” Following survey distribution, two interviews were conducted with professors to gain a deeper understanding of some of the more nuanced concepts of teaching.

Review of the Research

“What is Good College Teaching,” written by Warren Treadgold, a professor of Byzantine Studies and History at Saint Louis University, discusses the characteristics of good college teaching. Treadgold begins by shedding light on how websites like ratemyprofessor.com and student evaluations are rife with error. Treadgold explains that a student’s perspective on what makes a good professor should not be taken seriously because he has found that students often correlate a good professor with an easy grading professor. According to Treadgold, a good professor is one who has done extensive, published research in his or her own field of study.

For their article “Understanding Students is the Key to be a Good Professor,” Timothy Mahoney and Sang Choe (2016) distributed a fill-in-the-blank survey to eighty-six students in business classes asking what they thought the most important qualities of

a good professor were. They also asked students to briefly explain why they wrote the answers they did. Mahoney and Choe concluded that the four most important adjectives used to describe a good professor are "understanding," "organized," "enthusiastic," and "knowledgeable."

In the book *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), Ken Bain explores the nuances of good college teaching. Bain breaks down college teaching into major parts such as preparation, student expectations, class conduct, student treatment, and self-evaluation. To define the best, Bain conducted a study consisting of student evaluations and concluded that the best professors are extremely knowledgeable, prepare for classes by treating their lesson plans as problem-based sessions, expect a high level of participation from their students, craft a critical thinking environment, are understanding, and rigorously evaluate themselves.

My Research

There were a total of forty-one student surveys completed. Because the survey was free-form and open-ended, there were 191 individual responses to the questions and some executive decisions concerning data analysis were required. The responses were distilled into forty-seven attribute categories by merging attributes that were similar. For example, the attributes "funny," "hilarious," and "makes me laugh" became the "funny" category. Any words or phrases that had something to do with making a class fun or interesting were placed in the "engaging" attribute category. Moreover, the category "understanding" was created by merging "caring" and "understanding." The names of the major attribute categories were words or phrases that were written on survey forms at least fifteen times. Words or phrases written seven times or less were simplified in a less strict manner.

For the first question on the student surveys, "what are the five most important qualities of a community college professor," the four most common answers were "engaging," "understanding," "organized," and "knowledgeable about the source material." Seventy-three percent of students wrote "engaging;" seventy-one percent wrote "understanding;" sixty-eight percent stressed the importance of "organization," and thirty-nine percent said, "knowledgeable about the source material." For the second question, "what five things do you hope to take away from a class," the four most common answers were "real world skills" (61 percent), "knowledge of subject matter" (61 percent), "networking" (44 percent), and "getting a good grade or credit" (34 percent).

Of the thirty surveys that were distributed to professors, fifteen were returned and usable for this study. For the first question on the professor surveys, "what are the five most important qualities of a community college professor," the three most common answers were "knowledgeable about the source material" (80 percent), "engaging" (73 percent), and "understanding" (67 percent). For the second question, "what five things

do you hope your students learn from taking one of your classes," "critical thinking" was the most common answer (93 percent).

Discussion

What is a good college professor? Many professors at prominent four-year universities, such as Warren Treadgold, assert that a good professor is one who has done extensive research in his or her field and that professors should not change their teaching styles or objectives based on students' perspectives in evaluations. According to Treadgold (2016), student perspectives concerning the qualities that make up a good professor are not to be trusted because students are now searching for a leisurely college experience rather than a rigorous education: a phenomenon known as student consumerism. This argument suggests that students now want a professor who is "nice," "funny," and "lenient" in order to get a good grade without putting in any real effort. This assertion that students want a "nice," "engaging," or "understanding" professor has been confirmed by Mahoney and Choe (2016) and my own research.

Attributes such as "nice," "engaging," and "understanding," however, may not be connected with the negative effects of student consumerism. If Treadgold's claims are to be believed, then we should expect students and professors to disagree on the attributes that make up a good professor. One could reasonably assume that the majority of professors do not believe a good professor is simply an easy grading professor.

This study has found that community college professors and students agree on three attributes that make up a good professor: the qualities of being "understanding" or "caring," "engaging," and "knowledgeable about the subject matter." Because the survey participants filled in each blank with their own chosen words, the fact that over sixty percent of both students and professors chose the same three attributes demonstrates a strong connection between what community college students and professors think a good professor is. What's more, this study shows that students not only want an "understanding" or "caring" professor, but they also want a professor who is "organized" and "knowledgeable about the subject matter," which is in direct contradiction of the claims of Warren Treadgold. Also, this study has revealed that the majority of students would rather obtain real-world skills and absorb knowledge rather than simply get a good grade, which again directly contradicts Treadgold.

Although research articles that focus on the professor's perspective describe a good professor as one who has been widely published and has done extensive research in his or her field of study, neither this study nor the research by Mahoney and Choe (2016) shows that students agree. Mahoney and Choe's study of students in a four-year university showed that students think a good professor is "understanding," "organized," "enthusiastic," and "knowledgeable about the source material." This correlation suggests that the majority of all college students, regardless of institution type, agree on the attributes of a good professor. However, Treadwell, Mahoney, and Choe work for

four-year universities, not community colleges. The primary reason the students and professors in this study agree on the attributes that compose a good professor is that my study took place at a community college rather than a four-year university.

In an interview, a full-time professor at San Diego Miramar College, a community college, stated, "at a community college, there is a greater focus on the student as an individual. And rather than just push them along, we are able to truly be there for them" (Interview, November 2019). The way community colleges are organized seems to attract a different kind of professor from those of a four-year university. Professors who decide to pursue a career at a community college do so primarily because of their focus on the students and teaching. Mahoney and Choe (2016) stated that "human qualities of professors matter [to students]" (11) and my study shows that the human qualities matter to community college professors as well.

Future Research

It is recommended that a larger study of a similar nature be conducted. First, a new study should greatly increase the number of survey recipients in order to assure that the sample reflects the overall population of students and professors. Second, a new study should limit the variety of answers given by survey recipients in order to make data analysis possible without hindering the survey recipients' freedom. Lastly, a new study should include an equal number of both community colleges and four-year universities in order to clarify if the type of institution has an impact on the results.

Conclusion

The results of the student surveys paint a clear picture of what students look for in a professor. The majority of students want an organized professor with straightforward assignments and a clear path to completion. Students want a professor who understands that life happens sometimes and can be patient with students' individual circumstances. Students want a professor who is passionate about teaching so the professor can inspire students and make class interesting. Students also want a professor who understands the subject matter fluently in order to clearly transmit the information. This study has shown that community college professors feel a similar way. Community college professors want to inspire and engage students with exciting classes and activities. Community college professors want to demonstrate a clear mastery of the material being taught, in order to transmit the information clearly and concisely. Most importantly, community college professors truly want to be there to help students when they can.

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