What Students Say about Their Own Sense of Entitlement

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Headlines proclaim a greater sense of student entitlement than ever before: “New Data on College Students and Overconfidence” (Irvine 2011), “Teaching the Entitled Generation” (Miller 2009), “Student Expectations Seen as Causing Grade Disputes” (Roosevelt 2009), and the list goes on. Because students are coming to campus with perspectives and egos that have been shaped by overindulgent parents, technology, social media, the Internet, and disposable income (Rhee, Sanders, and Simpson 2010), many experts contend that students believe they are entitled to, or deserving of, professors providing them with certain treatments, services, and benefits (Howe and Strauss 2007). What’s more concerning is that these perks seem unrelated to students’ actual performance responsibilities inside the classroom (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt 2010). This chapter presents students’ perspectives about issues surrounding their sense of entitlement.

Focus Group Participants and Format

Sixty-seven students from three first-year university experience seminars were randomly selected for participation in focus groups about the attitudes and expectations of college students. Participants included 31 females and 36 males. The students completed a student-viewpoint questionnaire consisting of 25 questions and signed up for prearranged focus group sessions. Each of the questions was discussed during the focus group sessions.
The essence of students’ perceptions and observations encompassed the classroom environment, the role of the student, and the role of professors. Prior to addressing each of those aspects, however, this chapter examines a customer service mentality that seemed either implicitly assumed or explicitly stated during the focus groups.

**Customer Service and Consumer Mentality**

In response to the question of whether they “deserve to be treated as a customer of the university,” the students gave a resounding “Yes.” Only two students stated that they did not like the term *customer*. Those two preferred the term *consumer*, which implies the right to go elsewhere for better service. The majority of the students agreed that they “expect to get quality in service” because of the “high price” that they pay for college.

To examine student expectations as customers, the students were asked: “What do you deserve from the university in exchange for the money that you pay in tuition and fees?” Responses to this question included “a good education,” “teachers who care about their students,” and “assistance from my professors.” To the agreement of many other participants, one student said, “With the high cost of tuition, I think that we should get free iPads. These would help us be better students.”

The claim of being customers and consumers extended beyond items that might ensure learning and quality education; those claims rapidly seemed to encompass issues of individual and personal benefit. To this end, comments included items such as “not paying fees for things that do not pertain to me or that I did not ask for.” Example items included fees for the recreation center, health center, and parking. Other students commented on the need for “better food in the residence halls” and “DirectTV instead of cable.”

One issue vividly illustrates the customer mentality and encompasses classroom rules, the role of the student, and the role of the professor. Specifically, the issue related to e-mail. Seventy-eight percent of the students in the study indicated that it was the professor’s duty to respond to their e-mail within 24 hours. In contrast, only 45 percent of these same students felt that they should respond to a professor’s e-mail in this same 24-hour period. As one student said, “Professors should be held to a different standard. Professors should check their e-mail daily, but as students, sometimes we can only check it once a week.” A discussion as to the reasons for this double standard led to an almost unanimous agreement with the comments that “faculty do this for a living [and] are getting paid. . . . We (as students) are in several classes and have lives outside of the university. Faculty do not.”

**Classroom Environment, Rules, and Courtesy**

Several issues surrounding the classroom environment and accompanying rules were discussed. One such issue was related to attendance and
tardiness. An overwhelming majority of participants indicated that since they were paying for their education, it should be their choice of whether to attend class, when to arrive, and when to leave. The only concern voiced regarding this subject was that if a student was leaving class early or arriving late, that student should do so without interrupting others in class.

The next issue discussed was the use of cell phones in class. Though the groups seemed to be evenly split on whether students should be allowed to answer their cell phones in class, only 10 percent indicated that a student should not answer the phone in class. Further discussion led 90 percent of the students to indicate that they felt students should be allowed to exit the class to answer the phone. On the subject of texting during class, 97 percent of the students strongly supported the perception that it is acceptable to text during class. One student said, “The professor might think that this is rude, but we are paying for the class.” Another seemed to agree: “If that is how we choose to use our time, then that is what we should be allowed to do. We are paying for it.”

Students took issue with policies surrounding late work. Nearly 100 percent of the students in the focus groups stated that the university should impose a standard policy that forces professors to accept late work from students. One student’s comment struck a chord with the others when she stated, “We are paying for the class up front, and you are teaching it over the course of the semester. Why are we not given the assignments up front, and then given the opportunity to turn them in at any point in the semester?”

The Role of the Student

Students perceived their own role as having an end point of employment. The students unanimously indicated that their primary purpose was to get a degree in hopes of securing a better-paying job than the jobs available to high school graduates. To the agreement of many, one student indicated that “getting a job is the goal, and with that goal, how much time it takes to complete a degree is a huge issue.”

A great deal of discussion focused on the students’ perceptions of their role in getting an education versus getting training. Many students questioned the “liberal arts approach” to education. One student responded, “We do not have the interest (or the time) for many of the subjects that the university forces us to take.” Many other students supported this perception with comments such as: “I am a business major. By requiring me take classes in areas like music, theater, literature, and so on, the university is just trying to make more money off students by requiring additional classes that are not needed for my chosen career field.”

Ninety percent of the respondents agreed that students must exert effort to be successful. However, discussion regarding student responsibilities lacked a great deal of clarity. The students, as a whole, could not agree
on what constitutes effort and how much of it is necessary. Certainly, students acknowledged that their role was to “show up for class,” “be on time,” “be respectful,” “do the assignments,” and “participate.” These comments, though, appeared to be the conditioned response to standard questions. Upon simple probing, many of the students could not substantively define and illustrate the meaning of terms like respect and participation. “Being respectful,” for example, was described as “showing up for class, sitting quietly/not disrupting class, and doing your assignments.”

The Role of the Professor

“We are paying the instructor’s salary,” most students agreed, so they had much to say about the role of the professor in the classroom. Student views regarding the role of the professor mirrored those attributes that have already been established as characteristics of effective teaching, such as “being respectful, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous” (Delaney et al. 2010, 25). Key items that students felt that they “deserved” from their professors focused on “clear expectations,” “fair treatment,” and “empathy for personal situations that might impact [student] classroom performance.” To analyze this list, it is clear that students understand the role of the professor mostly in terms of their own needs and desires as customers.

What might be surprising is that students perceived a lack of faculty engagement with students. Most agreed that because they “pay huge amounts of money to be here and to get an education,” professors should demonstrate that they “appreciate” their students. Beyond appreciation, students perceived professors to have low concern for students’ welfare. Through a number of comments that were made with tones of deep conviction, students questioned the professors’ concern, empathy, and support for each student.

Students also had much to say about professors’ grading practices. When asked what grade they should be given for completing assigned readings and attending most class sessions, 44 percent stated that they deserved an A; 33 percent said that they deserved a B, with the rest indicating that they would most likely deserve a C. In an interesting contrast, when students were asked whether professors should consider student effort when assigning grades, their initial response was agreement with the student comment, “It is difficult to assess effort. I may be putting forth a great deal of effort, but I might not understand the material.” Further discussion by the participants led most of the students to agree that effort must play an important role in assigning grades, even though 80 percent of the students were unable to articulate exactly how the professor was to assess their efforts.

As students were polled about the actual dynamics of assigning grades, 75 percent said that they did not expect the professor to “give” grades to
students who were experiencing personal or medical issues outside of class. At odds with this statement was the perception that 90 percent of students indicated that it was appropriate for a professor to raise a student’s grade that was one percentage point away from a higher grade.

**Implications for the Classroom**

Students arrive on our campuses expecting to have not only a voice but also a significant degree of control over that college experience (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt 2010). The results of these focus groups seem to support this perspective and suggest that students view themselves as customers who are paying for a consumer product. While many professors may question the usefulness of that metaphor, perhaps instead of objecting, it would be useful to embrace that metaphor in ways that help professors develop strategies for working with entitled students. Efforts to personalize the course experience for students, showing concern for their well-being both in class and outside of class, could assist in changing the students’ attitudes about professorial engagement and therefore the quality of the learning experience that students are having.

In addition, an implication of students’ perspectives is that professors should examine their policies, procedures, and practices. Where Millennial students are concerned, it may not be enough to have policies on attendance and cell phone usage. Instead, professors must help students understand the rationales for those policies. Can attendance requirements be connected directly to students developing necessary knowledge and skills that they might find meaningful? What is the rationale in telling students to turn off their smartphones instead of finding ways to incorporate smartphone tools in course activities? Even students’ contradictions in the ways that they view grading may provide opportunities for professors to more deeply engage students in a process of examining their own learning. Many of our university colleagues comment about “meeting our students where they are.” By considering students’ voices and opinions, professors have a unique opportunity to productively “meet the students where they want to be.”

**References**


