A Nationwide Exploratory Study on Faculty Opinions on Student Preparation, Performance, and Evaluations

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Abstract

There is very little research into the faculty mindset variables as they prepare and make pedagogy decisions. Most of the research appears to have been focused on faculty opinions regarding items such as online learning environments or student evaluations. This study seeks to expand previous studies by conducting a survey of faculty on a national level in order to determine instructor attitudes and perceptions of student preparedness, performance and impact of student evaluations on standards, promotion and tenure. This exploratory study indicates faculty believes students are less prepared than they were three to five years ago. The faculty also felt the students seem to perform better in attending class and submitting assignments on time than in preparing for class. Lastly, the responses suggest that professors are increasing standards despite concerns over student evaluations and promotion/tenure.

Keywords: faculty opinion, student evaluation, grade bias, grade inflation, academic standards, promotion, tenure

1. INTRODUCTION

Educators are constantly seeking, searching, working for the optimum learning environment and experience that provides the maximum benefit for all parties involved. This is no simple easy endeavor and encompasses many different areas, perspectives, topics, and most importantly perceptions. Perhaps what makes this issue so important is that the results have direct impact on faculty job status and on student career preparations.

Whenever a topic has such great life implications individuals are bound to make decisions based on either personal belief or perceptions. Often time

perceptions are based on rumors, which are often based on the absence of information. While student evaluation of instruction are common place among institutions there are very few if any institutions that regularly conduct a faculty evaluation of student performance.

This paper seeks to conduct a national survey to determine faculty opinions and perceptions on the preparedness, performance and impact of student evaluations on standards, promotion, and tenure. The paper is as follows. First is review of relevant literature followed by an explanation of research methodology. Next is a reporting of survey results. The article concludes with a discussion of limitations and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the great paradoxes of higher education in the United States is that the grade point average (GPA) at colleges and universities has increased for decades (e.g., Rojstaczer, 2015; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010), whereas the amount of time students devote to their studies has continuously decreased (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Babcock & Marks, 2011; Pascarella, Blaich, Martin, & Hanson, 2011).

Many studies have provided results that indicate there is an apparent grade/evaluation association (Brashkamp et al 2011, Cashin 1995, Greenwald and Gillmore 1997, Marsh 1987, Marsh and Dunkin 1992, Marsh and Roche 2000, Miron 1985). Two other hypotheses are about leniency and reciprocity. The leniency hypothesis states those students who have lenient grading instructors give better evaluations. The reciprocity hypothesis is the belief that instructors intentionally assign higher grades near the time the student evaluation is performed. While the debate over the validity of these hypotheses continues, it does not appear to change the behavior of both faculty and students who believe such a relationship exists (Clayson, 2009).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLGY

This study sought to add to previous studies regarding faculty perceptions of student preparedness, performance, learning, and the effect of student evaluations. The method of investigation was an online survey in which participants were asked to answer questions on a 10 –point likert scale.

While this selection might go against conventional wisdom, it was selected for a couple of different reasons. First, the 10 point scale is analogous to the 0-100 or 0-10 point grading scale used by many faculty. More importantly, research has demonstrated that a 10-point scale generally can have higher explanatory power and shows higher validity (both convergent and discriminant) than the 5-point scale (Coelho and Esteves, 2007). Furthermore, in a study comparing 5, 7 and 10-point likert scales Dawes (2008) found that there were no appreciable differences in terms of standard deviation, skew, and kurtosis.

The majority of questions were derived from a 2011 study by Michael Birnbaum with a few questions added regarding academic dishonesty.

One of the intentions of the study sought to determine if faculty perceptions of current student preparedness and performance were the same or different from their recollection of previous students. Other research question areas were measured. They are listed below and are as follows:

- If faculty had raised or lowered course content, assignments, or exams
- if faculty perceived raising or lowering the assignment quantity, course or exam content would have an impact on their student evaluations
- if faculty perceived raising or lowering course content had an effect on learning and student evaluation
- if the faculty had raised or lowered course standards over the past 3 to 5 years
- if the faculty felt their current system of promotion and tenure gives incentives to raise or lower standards

Overall, the focus was to determine if faculty were making changes to their courses and if these changes were in response towards student evaluation feedback. More specifically, the study sought to determine if content quantity (assignments, exams, overall) was being adjusted in courses. Lastly, this investigation was interested if changes were made in grade calculation criteria that might help suggest a rationale for the grade inflation issue.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An email invitation was sent out to approximately 408 faculty located over the entire United States. Of the 408 invitations, 40 usable responses were collected for a response rate of 10.2%. The study attempted to obtain an equitable representation of all US regions, the different academic rank of faculty, years of teaching, and type of educational institution. Tables 1 through 6 show the results of the summary statistics.

Rank	# Response	Percent
Lecturer/Instructor	3	8%
Adjunct Professor	5	13%
Assistant Professor	9	23%
Associate Professor	7	18%
Professor	16	40%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Table 1: Summary Statistics: Faculty Rank

Gender	# Response	Percent
Male	31	78%
Female	9	23%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Table 2: Summary Statistics: Gender

Teaching Experience	# Response	Percent
Less than 12 years exp	16	40%
12 years to 24 years exp	11	28%
Over 24 years exp	13	33%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Table 3 Summary Statistics Teaching Experience

Region	# Response	Percent
Midwest	7	18%
Northeast	9	23%
Northwest	0	0%
Southeast	8	20%
Southwest	7	18%
West	9	23%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Table 4: Summary Statistics: Regional Representation

Type of Institution	# Response	Percent
Public 4 year Research	6	15%
Public 4 year Teaching	13	33%
Private 4 year Research	2	5%
Private 4 year Teaching	8	20%
Community College	11	28%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Table 5: Summary Statistics: Institutional Type

The first set of questions sought to ask the faculty respondent to rate in percentage their perception of their current student's skills, how much they attended, read before class, took notes, and turned in assignments on time. Two other questions asked the faculty to provide their estimation of whether they felt they had learned or obtained the skill sets necessary for graduations and if they felt their students were prepared to enter the workforce. Table 6 presents results of the responses for the six questions regarding student preparation and performance.

It appears that the perception is that the students are barely adequately prepared to enter the course with a score of 71% and that they prepare even less for success with only 48% reading before class and 53% taking notes. Students apparently do much better when it comes to showing up for class (82%) and turning in assignments (83%).

The results are even more interesting as if one were to average the four questions of preparation and performance and provide an academic grade then the students would be at a 67% average. Apparently, something must be occurring in the learning process or experience as when the students graduate and get ready to enter the workforce the faculty perception of the student's preparedness increases to a low B level or 83%.

Question : What percent of your students:	Mean
possess and demonstrate the requisite study skills to succeed in your course/college	**.71**
students attend your course on a regular basis?	**.82**
demonstrated having read content before class?	**.48**
take notes in class?	**.53**
turn in assignments on time?	**.83**
possess the general education, skill set, and knowledge required for a graduate?	**.83**
students do you feel are ready to enter the workforce?	**.82**

Table 6: Responses on student preparation and preparedness

Table 7 provides the mean and standard deviations of the responses for the remaining research questions.

The response results to the question regarding the amount of course/exam content and quantity of assignments required in class were interesting. The overall mean for each of the four categories was right in the middle indicating no change in material covered or assigned. Yet, when one examines the frequencies it appears that faculty appear to be covering and assigning more material than the numerical mean would suggest.

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Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
TECH_ASSIST	8.45	1.154
TECH_DETRACT	3.48	2.783
SOCMED_ASSIST	3.43	2.735
SOCMED_DETRACT	6.18	2.630
PREP	5.85	2.007
COURSE_CONT	5.63	1.849
ASSIGN_AMT	5.43	1.767
EXAM_CONTENT	5.18	1.647
EXAM_QAMT	4.83	1.466
STAND	5.10	1.336
ACD_INCREASE	5.78	1.747
ACD_SERIOUS	5.30	1.522
ACD_ACTION	5.83	2.049
RAISE_EVAL	3.83	2.062
INCREASE_EVAL	3.93	1.607
RAISE_LEARN	5.53	1.881
INCREASE_LEARN	5.40	1.692
PT_RAISE	2.68	2.635
PT_LOWER	4.10	3.241
PT_WDUMB	4.60	3.303

Table 7: Mean and Std. Deviation Statistics

Figure 1 shows the frequency percent distribution of responses for the question that asked the instructor if more or less content was added to their courses. Figure 2 shows the frequency percent distribution of responses for the question that asked if more or less homework was assigned.

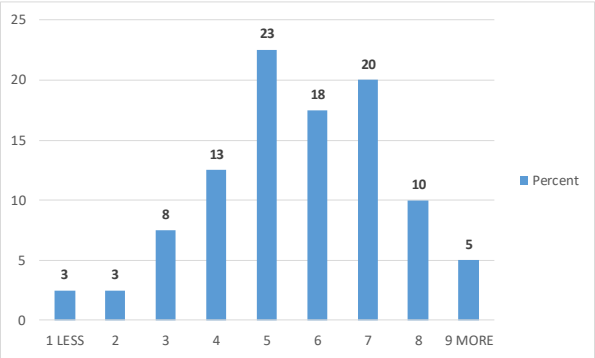

Figure 1: Frequency Percent Distribution for Amount Course Content Changed in 3 – 5 years

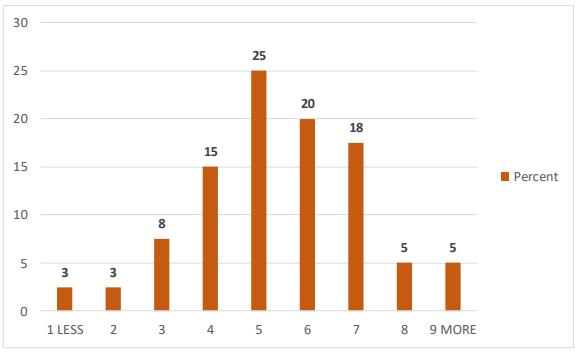

Figure 2: Frequency Percent Distribution for Amount Homework Assignment Changed in 3 – 5 years

The respondents also indicated that raising standards and increasing content could have significant positive impact on student learning (5.53 and 5.40 respectively). Likewise, faculty had indicated that raising standards and increasing content they could have a negative impact on their student evaluations (3.83 and 3.93 respectively). Yet despite this concern, the faculty respondents reported an increase in course content and assignment workload (5.63 and 5.43 respectively).

The results regarding faculty perception of raising standards and its impact on promotion and tenure were interesting. It was not too surprising that faculty did not seem to feel any incentive to increase the standards (2.68). The results indicate that instructors were not feeling any incentive to specifically lower standards (4.10). However, the responses to the question of whether or not the current promotion and tenure system encourages watering or 'dumbing down' were mixed. The average score was in the middle (4.60) and individual frequencies were spread across the scale. They are shown in Figure 3.

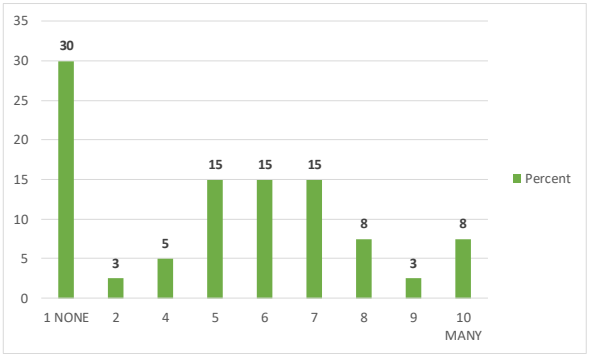

Figure 3: Frequency Percent Distribution for Incentives to Watering/Dumb Down Question

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this preliminary nationwide exploratory study provided some interesting results. The study found that faculty believes students are not fully prepared for their course, not reading chapter material during the course, and not being involved enough to take notes. Yet, the respondents did report that the students perform better in attending class and submitting assignments on time. The professors are reporting increasing course content, quantity of assignments, and overall standards. These actions are being undertaken without any perceived incentives for promotion and tenure in addition to concerns about retaliation from student evaluations. The indication that instructors are considering watering or dumb down their course content/standards should be investigated further.

This study has attempted to provide results for a national discussion that is handled more often on a local or regional level. There are many limitations to the study. First, this study has a very small sample size for a national study. As such, this study is not able to account for differences in the population such as gender, academic rank, type of institution, and regional variations. Second, email might not be the most effective sampling vehicle due to the sensitive nature of the topic. For example, faculty members might be concerned about providing results for fear of their responses being 'leaked' out to their decision makers or other concerned groups.

Lastly, this study relies on faculty to rely on their memory as it relates towards their perception of standards. It would be of strong interest to include other objective variables in conjunction with the survey instrument. Some variables could include collecting grade distributions, number of exam questions, assignments, and number of chapters covered. This survey also collected information on use of technology in the classroom and by students and was not reflected in the results. Hence, technology could also play an important role.

Again, the objective of this study was to expand previous studies by conducting a survey of faculty in order to determine instructor attitudes and perceptions of student preparedness, performance and impact of student evaluations on standards, promotion and tenure. The goal was to have a basis to form a national dialogue on a topic that is of international interest and importance.

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