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GRADUATE STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF THE CHARACTER AND CARING OF THEIR INSTRUCTORS

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Abstract

Recent research concludes that student-teacher relationships are foundational for greater instructional effectiveness and its concomitant increase in overall student achievement or learning. Similarly, research seems to demonstrate conclusively that trust is a vital component in the development of strong relationships. Recently, 488 current participants and recent graduates of an online and blended Master of Education program were surveyed about their perceptions of their instructors' character and concern for them as individuals. Survey respondents were public school teachers. Based on the survey's results, the personal qualities and characteristics that graduate students most seem to prefer in their instructors when determining their own evaluation of that professor's character and integrity include the following: interacting with students as individuals, remembering individual student needs, and acting consistently in a compassionate manner. The data indicate that students are much less "impressed" by what a professor may claim about integrity or compassion. Conversely, the qualities and characteristics that most damage a graduate instructor's character in the eyes of his or her students include the following: acting in a manner that communicates a lack of concern for individual student needs; being disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, harsh toward the class; presenting biased attitudes; and declining to help students in obvious need.

Keywords: trust in teaching, student-teacher relationships, teacher character, student evaluation of teachers

Recent research concludes almost universally that student-teacher relationships are foundational for greater instructional effectiveness and its concomitant increase in overall student achievement or learning (Cornelius-White, 2007). Similarly, research seems to demonstrate conclusively that trust is a vital component in the development of strong relationships (John K. Rempel, John G. Holmes, Mark P. Zanna, 1985). Given these findings, instructors at all levels would benefit from knowing which personal qualities and characteristics increase student trust.

Method

Recently, 488 current participants and recent graduates of an online and blended Master of Education program (enrollment of approximately 700 students) provided by a mid-sized, private, and religious Midwestern university were surveyed about their perceptions of their instructors' character and concern for them as individuals. Survey respondents were primarily public school teachers, approximately 25 to 35 years of age on average. The survey was delivered electronically, and the response rate was approximately 65%. The study's survey included the following questions: "Developing meaningful relationships with cohort members, interacting with cohort members as individuals," "Showing sincere concern for students and remembering their needs," and "Exhibiting a life of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and goodness." Students responded to these questions by rating them as having no importance, little importance, some importance, and high importance to them in their evaluation of their instructor's character and concern for them as an individual. In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, students were also asked to comment about the questions and their experiences related to the survey's topic. Finally, present and past students were also asked if any professors "failed" to exhibit sufficient character and compassion. Approximately 21% of the survey respondents indicated that they had. Their responses yielded specific information about developing trust to improve the vital student-teacher relationship.

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Findings

The overall average rating on the survey was 2.625, indicating that students perceived that all aspects of a professor's character are highly important; however, students made a clear distinction between merely talking about caring and actually demonstrating acts of genuine and individualized concern. When students were asked about the importance of an instructor stating his or her positive intentions, the average rating was 1.996, indicating that topic held almost exactly "Some Importance" (2.0) to the students. The highest rated question, "Showing sincere concern for students and remembering their needs," averaged 2.746. In determining a professor's character and concern for them, students, as might be expected, consistently and strongly preferred deeds to words. Again, while they perceived that speaking kind words to a class to be of some importance (average = 2.004), they insisted that exhibiting qualities of compassion and patience was much more valuable (average = 2.690). Table 1 provides averages for all the initial survey questions.

Survey Question	Average
Instructor's stated intentions	1.996
Instructor's congenial words to the class	2.004
Instructor interacting with students as individuals	2.631
Instructor remembering individual student needs	2.746
Instructor integrating compassion into course content	2.130
Instructor providing compassionate advice and guidance	2.159
Instructor acting consistently in a compassionate manner	2.690

Table 1. *Survey Question Averages*

Student comments under this section reinforced these survey results. Many students found a professor's compassion for individual needs to be most refreshing; one wrote, "Within my cohort there were a few occasions where a member of the group might have a family issue they were trying to deal with in addition to their school work. It was comforting to find that the professors were both understanding and compassionate." Another passionately commented, "I especially remember our (faculty) advisor saying that during our short time together some of us would experience life-altering experiences. He was so right! We had a divorce, a cancer diagnosis, a birth, heart surgery, an adoption--and we supported each other through all of these things. He was tough but he was very caring." A third student wrote, "Early in my M.Ed. program, a teacher I worked closely with at my school died suddenly. I was devastated, and both the professor and the cohort played an active role in helping me to move through the grief process. They were not my only support system, but they were an important piece of it."

As previously stated, students who had a negative experience with a teacher, determining that the teacher lacked character or concern for them as individuals, answered additional questions in an effort to determine which teacher qualities and characteristics most damage trust between the student and his or her teacher. The lowest rated question, "using coarse or inappropriate language," seemed to have little impact on a student's impression of a teacher's trustworthiness or overall character (average = 1.229); conversely, the two highest rated questions, averaging 2.037 and 1.888 respectively, focused on the instructor's lack of concern for individual student needs and his or her disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, or harsh behaviors toward the class. Similarly highly rated concerns included the instructor's display of biased attitudes (average = 1.757) and his or her avoidance of helping students in need (average = 1.623).

Students with bad experiences in this area were exceptionally passionate. One commented: This doctor was racially biased and rude and criticized those students who were of the Caucasian race. Any



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student who was of color or mixed race was treated differently. We complained to the president about him, and he was removed from our class. However, the experience was damaging because we never fully recovered the information that was supposed to be conveyed.

Another wrote, "I had one very uncaring, unsupportive and very rude professor who made us feel inadequate and was not responsive to our needs. She lashed out when someone tried to speak up." Finally, one student was very upset about what s/he perceived to be unfair treatment by an instructor, writing: I had one professor who did not keep her word with me.... She also changed the due date on the research paper because 85% of the cohort complained that they were too busy. Another cohort member and I had our papers done because we managed our time well. I also had another professor who told me I didn't understand the English language on two or three occasions. The words I used had multiple meanings, but he wouldn't listen to what I had to say. I did not enjoy his class at all. It was frustrating because he made excuses for his behavior and way of conducting the class.

Implications

This study indicates several beneficial behaviors for a professor to develop more meaningful relationships with students and presents several additional topics for greater research and deeper consideration.

The personal qualities and characteristics that graduate students most seem to prefer in their instructors when determining their own evaluation of that professor's character and integrity include the following: interacting with students as individuals, remembering individual student needs, and acting consistently in a compassionate manner. The data indicate that students are much less "impressed" by what a professor may claim about integrity or compassion. Conversely, the qualities and

characteristics that most damage a graduate instructor's character in the eyes of his or her students include the following: acting in a manner that communicates a lack of concern for individual student needs; being disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, harsh toward the class; presenting biased attitudes; and declining to help students in obvious need.

This study suggests related topics for additional consideration. Since the questions for the study were confined to a specific need within a private, religious university, a follow-up survey with more general questions would be beneficial. Also, since the survey respondents were all adult professionals working full-time in a demanding career, their results may reflect that life experience; broader survey demographics may provide other helpful information. Finally, because of the constraints of this report's length, no inferential statistics were presented. Determining and presenting whether there were statistical differences among the survey responses would serve to strengthen or to weaken the study's overall impact.

References

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