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**College Students’ Perceptions of the Characteristics of Effective Teachers in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of the Students’ Voice**

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This summer my students and I had the opportunity to present research conducted in the spring 2012 semester on, “College Students’ Perceptions of the Characteristics of Effective Teachers in Higher Education: The Students’ Voice,” at the American Teacher Educators (ATE) Summer Institute in Boston, MA. This qualitative study explored students’ perceptions of the characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers in face-to-face classroom instruction. It also investigated the interpersonal attributes (including personality related traits) that teachers share professionally.

**Introduction**

The goal of this study was to define effective and ineffective teaching in the classroom and to better understand what effective teacher characteristics look like in the classroom from the students’ viewpoint. Student research assistants led focus groups to ascertain this information. A summary of the demographics of the study follow.

Focus Group	Number of Participants	Gender	Classification
#1	4	Female (3) Male (1)	Junior (3) Sophomore (1)
#2	8	Female (5) Male (3)	Classifications Varied
#3	6	Female (5) Male (1)	Freshman (2) Sophomore (2) Junior (2)
Total	18	Female (13) Male (5)	Classifications Varied

**Literature Review**

Detrick (2011) identified the top two attributes of teaching behaviors as “enthusiasm” and “respect for the students,” while the Memorial University

of Newfoundland (2008) study (as cited in Delaney et al., 2010) confirmed that “being respectful of students” and “being knowledgeable of the subject matter” were the top two characteristics that were essential for effective teaching from the students’ perspective. Allan et al. (2009) confirm that the top five statements describing effective teachers were: excellent knowledge of the subject, including group activities, encouraging discussion, being approachable, and starting sessions on time. Thompson et al., (2004) note that the top 5 characteristics of an effective teacher include: fairness, exhibiting a positive attitude, preparedness, personal touch, and sense of humor, while the Stronge (2002) study classified teachers as being effective by both their background and their personality. Background wise, effective teachers were determined by their verbal ability, educational coursework, teacher certification, content of knowledge, and teaching experience. Relative to personality, teachers were considered effective if they cared about their students, were fair and respectful, interacted with students socially, promoted enthusiasm and motivated learning, had a positive attitude toward teaching, and their role of reflective practice.

Lastly, Delaney et al. (2010) confirm that effective teachers are respectful of their students, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous. Tang et al. (2005) suggest that teachers’ attitudes toward students, rather than their professional abilities, are the crucial differences between ineffective and effective teachers.

### **Results: Summary of the Characteristics of Effective Teachers (from the students’ voice)**

A qualitative analysis confirmed that some of the most important characteristics of effective teachers include:

- passion about teaching and the subject matter
- knowledge of the subject matter
- confidence in teaching ability (i.e., teacher self-efficacy)
- being organized
- enthusiasm in the classroom
- encouraging students (i.e., being able to help students succeed)
- creativity
- having respect for students
- providing feedback and positive reinforcement
- demonstrating discipline
- flexibility and adaptability

Other characteristics that influenced the dynamics of the classroom (including personality related traits) of effective teachers included traits such as:

- showing understanding

- being relatable
- caring
- patience
- open mindedness
- empathy for students
- having a good sense of humor
- humbleness

### **Results: What does Effective Teaching Look Like in the Classroom?**

Students gave examples of what effective teaching characteristics looked like in the classroom and how they could be fostered in the classroom. Students perceived that learning styles were very important in the classroom, e.g., some students perceived that a “visual” teaching style was most effective for students. The premise that African American students learn better through movement and visual modalities was also brought up by participants who suggested that teachers should try to find some way to incorporate movement and visual modalities into their daily lesson plans.

There was consensus that the use of modern technology in the classroom class was extremely important, e.g., the use of multimedia presentations and the showing of videos. Other suggestions included skits and in-class experiments. Students perceived that these activities are highly interactive and force students to engage with one another and the teacher. Students also perceived that the use of visual illustrations and physical demonstrations would make complex concepts easier to understand and improve class performance. Additional examples of fostering “effective” characteristics in the classroom included the use of field trips as incentives.

One focus group perceived that impromptu field trips would give students something to look forward to and the change of scenery would also refresh the mind and allow for greater concentration. One student stated that it was important for effective teachers to create experiences divorced from the strict classroom setting. Another student also advocated the integration of games into the lecture as a way of keeping students attentive and increasing retention of coursework. It was also perceived that a student-led textbook reading session would be another vehicle to maintain students’ attention.

Students perceived that organization and respect are essential characteristics of an “effective” teacher. One student stated that teachers should have an outline prior to the beginning of the semester and stick to it as closely as possible. They also perceived that effective teachers were able to quickly adjust their schedule to accommodate any unforeseen setbacks, were punctual, avoided detaining students past their allotted time, and that effective teachers allowed students to ask questions and engage in discussion on the subject matter but restricted unnecessary digressions. “Effective teachers also treated college students as young adults, not children, were aware of the challenges of being a student, and were realistic in their expectations of students.”

Significant elements that contribute to the environment of the classroom are the discipline and personality of the instructor. Students perceived that they were more likely to enjoy and perform well in a class that

was soundly structured and controlled. It was stated that an effective teacher can make classes more enjoyable and influence students to work more diligently. An effective teacher also assists students in understanding a difficult lesson more easily.

Overall, students perceived that “effective” teachers have a positive impact on their educational experience. In essence, effective teachers: 1) alter a student’s negative perception of an entire course. “In this scenario, students generally leave class, not only with a good grade, but with a genuine interest in the coursework;” 2) make learning and retaining the information easier, reduce student stress, create a comfortable classroom environment, and remove fear of failure; 3) help students foster a passion for the class as well as the student’s future profession; 4) are also positive role models and sources of inspiration; 5) encourage students through their teaching to strive for excellence; 6) impact the student’s experience to the point where “learning doesn’t feel like learning;” and 7) teach in such a way that the course is seen as “challenging, but not stressful.”

After explaining how they would like to see these characteristics fostered in the classroom, the participants were asked how this would better their educational experience. Students perceived that: 1) Grades would improve; 2) They would attend class more often; 3) Students would be incentivized to want to engage more with their teacher and the class; and 4) The students’ expectations of themselves would also rise because they would not want to disappoint their teacher by receiving unsatisfactory grades in the class.

### **Results: Characteristics of Ineffective Teachers**

Characteristics of ineffective teachers were also identified and defined. Some of the conclusions relative to ineffective versus effective teachers were that effective teachers “make classes more enjoyable and incentivize students to work harder” while ineffective teachers “frustrate students” and “stifle their growth.” The general consensus was that “whether teachers know it or not, they greatly impact a student’s self-esteem and self worth.”

### **Summary**

Students’ perceptions of the characteristics of ineffective teachers from the current study are in sync with prior studies on this topic. For example, students perceived that “enthusiasm” and “respect for students” were important, as well as knowledge of the subject matter; this finding is in line with the top two attributes of teachers from the Detrick (2011) and Newfoundland (2008) studies.

The findings of the current study have significant implications for the way that teachers deliver information and the impact of teaching style on the academic achievement of undergraduate students. Effective teaching is critical in student learning. What we can garner from the students’ voice can provide guidance in developing curricula as teachers are being prepared to enter the teaching environment.

By understanding classrooms from the perspectives of students, teachers can secure the students’ voice in areas that directly affect them in the classroom. Information from the students’ perspectives can also shed light on

what directly affects the student in his educational experience. The students' voice can also be considered when working toward the enhancement of curriculum instruction, pedagogy, and student retention.

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### Announcements

#### Student Success and The Quality Agenda

April 4-6, 2013  
Miami, Florida

**Register by February 15 for best conference rates**

*Student Success and The Quality Agenda* will examine the most important but least discussed component of the completion agenda—quality in student learning. This conference will encourage participants to discuss the new contexts for student learning given the diversity of today's students, including their differing backgrounds, learning styles, and pathways to and through college. Participants will investigate the latest research on high-impact practices and teaching, student service, and assessment strategies that strengthen the quality of student learning and close student achievement gaps. Conference sessions will provide an opportunity to examine different approaches to faculty and student services leadership development and to

campus and cross-institutional collaborations linked to a quality agenda.

Please join colleagues from across the country to share and examine promising practices in linking completion with quality and assuring optimal learning environments for the success of *all* students.

In addition to a full roster of concurrent sessions and plenary presentations, AAC&U also offers practical **Pre-Conference Workshops**—three hours of active learning with some of higher education’s leading innovators in developing strategies, practices, and policies that lead to student success.

Learn more about this [conference](#) and [register online](#).

For more information, please call 202.387.3760, or write to Siah Annand at [network@aacu.org](mailto:network@aacu.org).

***Inside Higher Ed* Webinar: "Academic Program Review - Touching the Third Rail of Higher Education Finance"**

AAC&U is pleased to share with our members this information about a webinar being offered by one of our partners, [Inside Higher Ed](#).

**Academic Program Review - Touching the Third Rail of Higher Education Finance**

**An *Inside Higher Ed* Webinar**

**Wednesday, October 17, 1:00-2:00 p.m. Eastern**


**Register by October 5 and save \$50**

With budgets tight at most institutions, and demands for accountability rising, more and more institutions are thinking about academic program review. But conducting reviews is easier said than done. Who decides the criteria to be used? How is success judged? How can reviews be done in ways that have credibility? And how can reviews be seen as a tool to help a campus strategically connect resources and mission, not just as a way to pick programs to eliminate.

On Wednesday, October 17 at 1 p.m. EDT, *Inside Higher Ed* presents a webinar featuring Richard Staisloff, founder and principal of rpkGROUP, a consulting firm supporting colleges, universities and other nonprofit groups. Mr. Staisloff has advised numerous colleges and universities on how to carry out program reviews fairly and effectively.

The presentation will cover such topics as:

- How to tell whether your institution could benefit from program reviews.
- How program reviews differ from the analyses conducted by accrediting and licensure organizations.
- How to set up program reviews.
- How to measure both quality and financial issues associated with programs.

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- How to create a change agenda that moves the institution from cutting to strategic reallocation.
  - How to chart a course to act on program reviews.
  - How to assure the findings will have support on campus.

The program is ideal for:

- Provosts
- Senior administrators
- Academic affairs
- Financial affairs
- Deans
- Department chairs

The presenter will make a 30-minute presentation and then take questions for 30 minutes.

This is an online event—you will not need to dial into a conference call to participate.

The cost to register is \$199. You're welcome to gather colleagues together to view the webinar via a single monitor, but multiple logins using the same username/password combination will not be allowed.

**Register early—by October 5—and the cost is only \$149.**

To register for the webinar, click [here](#).

For more information, contact *Inside Higher Ed's* David Mundy at 202.448.6143 or e-mail [audio@insidehighered.com](mailto:audio@insidehighered.com).

