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Keywords

academic entitlement, academic leaders, consumer mentality, teaching evaluation, college students

The Impact of Consumer and Academic Entitlement Attitudes on Student Course and Faculty Evaluations: A Call for Change to Academic Leaders

Monica Galloway Burke Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs,
Western Kentucky University

Aaron W. Hughey Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University

Colin Cannonier Associate Professor of Economics, Belmont University

Abstract

Given the increasing number of individuals pursuing higher education, the rising costs of higher education, an ever-increasing demand for ancillary amenities, and the recent upsurge of narratives about students' expectations in academia, this article comments on the impact of consumer and academic entitlement attitudes on student evaluations of faculty and courses in higher education. We contend conversations should occur about a growing and urgent need for academic leaders to revisit the way in which course and faculty evaluations are used in assessing the performance of faculty due to entitlement. We argue devising performance-standard measures that reflect greater objectivity can have an enduring influence on the role of students and the autonomy given to faculty, minimizing the impact of student entitlement.

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Introduction

The cost of higher education tuition in the United States has continued to rise over the past two decades (see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018); and with the higher price tag, it is not uncommon for consumers (i.e., students) to expect nothing but the best for the amount of money they spend. Additionally, in order to attract students, institutions of higher education increasingly defer to competition and the principle of supply and demand, which causes them to remain informed, address what consumers want, and view the enterprise through a more competitive lens. Edmunson (1997), for instance, argued universities catering to students to boost enrollment numbers, and increasing marketing efforts to recruit students as consumers, have produced a consumer mentality among some college students. Completing the feedback loop, this approach has led many leaders in higher education to view students more as “consumers,” which has caused them to focus on providing what they want as opposed to what they potentially need. The implications here should be fairly obvious and inherently disconcerting. If higher education adheres to a consumer-based model, then consumer entitlement, defined as a customer’s tendency to expect special treatment and automatic compliance by whichever entity is offering goods or services (Boyd & Helms, 2005), is a natural consequence.

Viewing Students as Consumers

Clayson and Haley (2005) contended that the consumer model, which has become entrenched within higher education, constitutes a disservice because when higher education capitulates to the “student as customer” model, a role it has not historically played, it does not serve the interests of its constituencies. Students now regard college as simply another consumer marketplace (Bellah, 1999), essentially viewing their higher education as a commodity. This perception precipitates a mindset among students that they should be catered to since they are paying customers (Cain, Romanelli, & Smith, 2012; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Moreover, as the costs associated with attending college have escalated exponentially in recent years, this mindset has become even more prevalent and entrenched among the college student population. In fact, this position is further reinforced and supported by Lombardi (2007), who concluded students about to attend college often believe they are *entitled* to attend college and institutions are *obligated* to ensure their success toward graduation. Students who feel entitled tend to demonstrate the same characteristics as customers who see themselves as entitled. As such, entitled students as with entitled customers are more willing to confront personnel or complain vociferously regarding any perceived poor service (Boyd & Helms, 2005). The quality, as well as the

value, associated with acquiring an educational credential can become compromised when student satisfaction with their education becomes more important than its innate utility.

When students see themselves predominantly as consumers, and when the leadership at a college or university also adopts a similar philosophy, a number of detrimental consequences can manifest. College students who view themselves primarily as consumers share many commonalities with customers who are shopping at a high-end store. If an institution does not supply exactly what they want, then they, and possibly their parents or guardians, will threaten and demand those responsible be held accountable and suffer some punishment for the perceived slight. If an institution does not meet their expectations, they might complain to management (i.e., senior administrators) about the service they received, share their complaints via social media, threaten legal action, or go elsewhere. Further, this mentality can permeate all levels of the institution. For example, a student may feel that he/she should have more control over what a professor does (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010) to what grade should be received (Ciani, Summers, & Easter, 2008). Students then can “exert an influence as consumers who are purchasing the commodity of higher education thus creating the phenomenon of student entitlement” (p. 355), believing on some level they are deserving of certain goods, services, and accommodations provided by their institutions and professors (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010).

Academic Entitlement

Specific to the academic domain, entitlement can be defined as “a self-centered disposition characterized by a general disregard for traditional faculty relationship boundaries and authority” (Lippmann, Bulanda, & Warenaar, 2009, p. 198). Academic entitlement also entails students possessing an expectation for certain positive academic outcomes and success (e.g., good grades) independent of performance or without taking personal responsibility to achieve academic success (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011). For any experience to be of significant value—either to the individual engaged in the experience or to the stakeholders who benefit from the experience, both in an absolute or in a more pragmatic sense—that experience must be built on significant effort. In order for grades to be meaningful, they should be an accurate representation of the knowledge and skills the student has actually acquired as a result of study, synthesis, and critical analysis. What a student “feels” about an instructor or methodologies utilized does not constitute an

objective measure of the inherent value of either. Therefore, the student’s lack of accountability and responsibility for academic performance, including counterfactual thinking and assertions, is essentially ignored when using student evaluations as a primary source in the evaluation process. The bottom line is impartiality can become untenable due to a student’s academic entitlement and consumer mentality.

Dubovsky (1986) found entitlement in education has five facets, two of which are related to academic learning and performance in the classroom. One facet involves the idea an entitled student believes shortfalls associated with learning are due to problems with the instructor or the system rather than the student’s own shortcomings. A second facet maintains an entitled student believes everyone in class should receive equal recognition or reward regardless of effort put forth or ability. For example, Tippin, Lafreniere, and Page (2012) found students desire to be compensated for effort in grade assignment to supplement low performance, placing a considerable amount of importance on the professor’s consideration. Consequently, an increased sense of entitlement can manifest in students expressing higher expectations from the faculty member and exhibiting unfavorable and inappropriate behaviors, including grade negotiations (Baer & Cheryomukhin, 2011) and academic dishonesty (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008). Students with a grander sense of entitlement also may be more aggressive, obtrusive, and feel empowered to make demands of the staff, faculty, and administrators (Cain et al., 2012). Unfortunately, these expectations and behaviors can become embedded into the college classroom, as academia has witnessed an increase in the number of students who approach their professors for higher grades, claim disastrous personal outcomes for the professor if they do not receive these grades, and expect professors to accommodate their needs and demands (Greenberger et al., 2008). Such unrealistic expectations, of course, can infiltrate the teaching and course evaluation process.

Course and Faculty Evaluations

Faculty and course evaluations completed by students have been a mainstay in higher education; constitute an almost universally accepted method of gathering information about faculty’s teaching and the instructional process (Zabaleta, 2007); and have long been a tradition and integral part of colleges and universities in driving curricular change and assessing faculty performance (Kidd & Latif, 2004; Weinberg, Hashimoto, & Fleisher, 2009). The highly questionable assumption associated with the use of student evaluations has been the mostly

uncontested pretext that students are in the best position to know whether the faculty's teaching is adequate and they are learning (Clayson & Haley, 1990); determining what is being learned is germane to their current and future viability. Some researchers have found student evaluations are sometimes seen as valid measures of teaching quality, but this evidence is not consistent (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013); however, there appears not to be a consensus in studies that examined faculty perceptions of the student evaluation process currently implemented at most institutions. It should be noted some faculty also consider student and course evaluations of teaching meaningful, and they can make improvements based upon the feedback received—for example, improving or refining some aspects of course instruction (Balam & Shannon, 2010; Beran & Rokosh, 2009; Beran, Violato, Kline, & Frideres, 2005). Concerns, however, continue to abound about the practical use, reliability, and validity of student feedback of faculty teaching. Many faculty members believe students are not experts in pedagogy and course content; thus, they can assess only their own response to a class and teaching delivery (Ackerman, Gross, & Vigneron, 2009). Moreover, a number of faculty believe student ratings are neither reliable nor valid (Balam & Shannon, 2010) and have limited impact on enhancing instruction or application to teaching practice (Beran & Rokosh, 2009). The anonymity inherent with student evaluations in general, and in student comments in particular, although necessary, also may work against the collection of reliable information by allowing students to make unfounded claims (Vassey & Carroll, 2016). Obviously, if student evaluations are relied upon by academic leadership and various academic committees to determine faculty performance, retention, tenure and promotion, as well as merit pay increases, their unreliability and lack of validity matter and should be conclusively demonstrated.

Characteristics beyond the control of a faculty member can play a critical role in the student evaluation process, which include mandatory courses (Donnon, Delver, & Beran, 2010) and courses with higher workloads (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997), which typically yield lower student ratings. Intangible factors also have been shown to affect student evaluations, which include the personality, likeability, and popularity of the faculty member (Blackhart, Peruche, DeWall, & Joiner, 2006; Clayson & Sheffet, 2006) and classroom features (i.e., those considered less comfortable and dated, particularly regarding seating and lighting) (Hill & Epps, 2010) impact satisfaction and student evaluation of professors as well. Furthermore, variations in the personal characteristics of an instructor, such as race and gender or the duality of these social constructs, account for small but statistically

significant variation in student evaluations (e.g., Beran & Violato, 2005; Chisadza, Nicholls, & Yitbarek, 2019; Mengel, Sauermaun, & Zölitz, 2019; Smith, Yoo, Farr, Salmon, & Miller, 2007). Furthermore, a faculty member who has the reputation of being easier or more sympathetic to the personal situations of students often will receive higher ratings than an instructor who is more rigorous and more reserved relative to taking personal circumstances into consideration.

A foundational concern with using student evaluations to evaluate faculty performance is that faculty have little to no control of the aforementioned factors. As such, when conducting faculty evaluations, academic leaders should limit the consideration of factors in the evaluation process that are not directly under the faculty member's direct influence or control. The point is that student perceptions often are influenced by factors ancillary to the student evaluation process. Department heads, deans and provosts would do well to keep these aspects in mind when considering the extent or weight to assign the often subjective ratings given to a particular faculty member by the students who fill their class rolls. A sense of academic entitlement also should be considered as a factor that can influence a student's evaluation of teaching and the course that is beyond the control of the professor.

Consequences of Entitlement in Course and Faculty Evaluations

While not all college students exhibit characteristics of academic entitlement, those who do can directly and indirectly create negative consequences for faculty with their ratings and feedback on course and faculty evaluations. When it manifests, however, academic entitlement can play a major role in poor student evaluations of professors (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). Chowning and Campbell (2009) found student course evaluations are best predicted by their academic performance and grades, but their evaluations of the course instructor are best predicted by their level of academic entitlement. Because many academic leaders tend to use student evaluations as a primary mechanism to assess faculty teaching—and since these assessments often are tied to compensation—academic entitlement sometimes can entice faculty to reduce academic standards (McPherson & Jewell, 2007). Research studies also have reported rigor is inversely correlated to student evaluation ratings (Clayson & Haley, 1990; Heckert, Latier, Ringwald-Burton, & Drazen, 2006; Sojka, Gupta, & Deeter-Schmelz, 2002); and accordingly, when displeased, evaluations offer students an opportunity to exact revenge on a rigorous instructor (Wright, 2006).

The potential consequences for faculty members decidedly can be deleterious if student evaluations are used as the primary source for evaluating teaching. Therefore, when tying students' ratings to compensations and rewards as incentives, the inference, notwithstanding the integrity of the faculty member, is that rigor can be significantly compromised, and the educational experience can suffer immensely. It also should be noted grading leniency of faculty may influence the level of ratings (McKeachie, 1997). Although the importance and strength of this assertion related to the validity of student evaluations has been debated (e.g., Brockx, Spooren, & Mortelmans, 2011; Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997), students' expected grades influence their evaluations. Students reward instructors who grade easier with higher evaluations (Clayson, 2009; Gillmore & Greenwald, 1999; Johnson, 2003; Weinberg et al., 2009).

Due primarily to academic and consumer entitlement, the purpose of student evaluations in academia can be distorted by some students who see the process as a punitive measure for faculty members who do not meet their expectations, even if their rationales are impractical and learning is not enhanced. Students with high academic entitlement tend to engage in more expressive and vengeful dissent about their class experiences (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Entitlement can precipitate aggressiveness and passive-aggressiveness in evaluations by students who never spoke with an instructor about any concerns but react like a difficult or unhappy customer, even if their feelings are based on unreal circumstances or unreasonable expectations. Unfortunately, taken collectively course and faculty evaluations can place the total responsibility for the quality of a student's education and learning on faculty rather than on the student; and the reliance administrators place on student evaluations produces passive, or even contemptuous students who can lower the quality of a course (Bunge, 2018).

One of the purposes of academia in higher education is to provide knowledge, quality teaching, and scholarship within the context of a supportive academic environment. Increasingly, however, the focus of a faculty and course assessment is based less on teaching effectiveness, student support, and actual learning due to various external factors. Academic and consumer entitlement mentality can create an externalized responsibility for academic success that often is seen in students with a high level of academic entitlement (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Kopp & Finney, 2013). Such attitudes can create a cognitive bias for self-preservation in which the student deflects blame to the instructor due to a lack of accountability for learning and an entitled expectation about professors and their course policies. Entitlement often diminishes the details

faculty provide in syllabi, the content of the course, student engagement, and student support since students' emotions, expectations, and a quid pro quo mentality can take precedence in a student's evaluation of faculty. If course and faculty evaluations can be influenced by students' expectations of academic success, lack of responsibility for their academic success, and other external factors, the practice of putting substantial emphasis on these measures in assessing faculty performance and related personnel matters should be conceptualized, questioned, and seriously reconsidered.

Concluding Thoughts

Conceptualizing and considering the role of academic and consumer entitlement in academia should now become a part of the conversation among academic leadership related to the evaluation process. In principle, student feedback should be an integral part of the evaluation of teaching; although, the reality of how a student's sense of entitlement can influence his/her behavior and feedback should be viewed as an intervening variable in the overall evaluation process which simply is not done. Many faculty members have encountered students who have unrealistic expectations or a sense of entitlement relative to completing course requirements and adhering to basic expectations regarding those requirements, desiring to dictate academic rigor (Lippman et al., 2009).

Some researchers have noted entitlement is increasing, particularly among the younger generations (Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and have asserted students supposedly have become more demanding regarding their perceived rights, regardless of actual effort and learning in academia (Cain et al., 2012; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). When students believe they should be treated as customers rather than as students, believing they are entitled to positive academic outcomes irrespective of achievement, effort, or personal responsibility, and blurring the boundary lines of the traditional faculty-student relationship (Lippman et al., 2009), student evaluations then become more of an opinion survey, which has never been their intended purpose. If students view faculty merely as service providers (Singleton et al., 2010), faculty begin to be impacted and the learning process can become severely compromised.

Ultimately, the basic economic principle that people face tradeoffs (Mankiew, 2015) cannot be ignored—i.e., to get one thing we usually have to give up something else—which can create an unintended consequence within a performance-based system. The onus to take the unintended consequences into consideration in the

faculty evaluation process should be on those who use course and faculty evaluations in important decisions that impact faculty—the academic leaders. The complexity and external influences of these evaluations also should be acknowledged. Of course, correlation is not causation. Not all students possess a consumer mentality and believe they are academically entitled. However, academic leaders in higher education must ensure “meaningful learning is best served by maintaining academic standards—even when there is some lessening of student and teacher comfort levels” (Stewart, 2009, p. 111).

Viable options to ensure equitability and meaningful learning can include taking students’ sense of entitlement into consideration while using alternative, non-numerical, and multiple assessment methods to evaluate how faculty members deliver instruction, plan their courses, assess their students, and deliver content. Academic leaders can consider peer evaluations of teaching, participation in a professional development workshop or conference related to teaching, or a requirement of at least one published peer-reviewed journal article within a specific time frame. Yes, it would take more time to incorporate new methods to assess faculty teaching, but is it not worth the effort to ensure a more equitable process? Considering the impact and peripheral factors associated with students’ consumer mentality, entitlement, and expectations in the classroom, it is time for administrative leaders in higher education to take a closer look at these influences on faculty and course evaluations, examine what is really going on when students evaluate their courses and faculty, and respond accordingly.

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