

# HOW EXPECTATIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH FACULTY VARY BY STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES

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## Abstract

*An instrument was developed to measure business students' attitudes toward their professors regarding what they want from a student-faculty relationship. The survey results indicate that students want a multidimensional relationship consisting of academic assistance, individual respect, personalized treatment, and classroom interaction. The type and degree of relationship desired is examined by students' learning style types.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between a university and its students is becoming increasingly important. During periods of severe competition, successfully establishing long-term relationships with students should lead initially to lower dropout rates and, eventually, to personal referrals and alumni donations. Despite varied attempts to combat attrition on campus, retention rates remain low [DeLucia, 1994]. Since professors are the service providers at a university with the highest student contact, the student-faculty relationship could be vital in determining if a student has a positive relationship with the university. Research supports the notion that student-faculty interaction is a major determinant of student satisfaction and success [DeLucia, 1994; Krehbiel, McClure, and Pratsini, 1997].

Most business schools do not ask students about the types of relationships they want with faculty. From the students' perspective, it is not reasonable to assume that all students want to build and foster individual relationships with their professors. They probably do not know "how" and "how much" they will benefit from improved relationships. We need to know what students expect of relationships with faculty members and whether their expectations are homogeneous or vary among students.

The main goal of this paper is to determine the type and degree of relationships that students want from their professors. Furthermore, this paper will investigate if students' individual learning styles relate to the type and degree of faculty relationships expected.

## II. STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Very little is known about student expectations. Providing services that students perceive as excellent require that a university know what students want [Shank, Walker, and Hayes, 1995]. Although the exact nature of these expectations remains elusive, they can generally be classified as two types: expectations of their performance and expectations associated with the instructor [Becker et al., 1990].

Most attention has been devoted to the expectations and evaluations of performance. Instructors set performance expectations in syllabi and grade students in the course. Students evaluate the faculty member and the course on a college-approved evaluation form. Although there has never been agreement on the appropriate criteria for measuring teacher effectiveness, a stream of research attempts to continually improve instruction rating instruments [Marks, 2000]. Marsh and Roche [1997] conclude that effective teaching is primarily a function of the instructor, not the course.

Similar research that focuses on student expectations of their professors is lacking. Instead, overall expectations of the course and instructor are solicited in open-ended questions or expectations of specific programs are rated [Becker et al., 1990; DeLucia, 1994; Cannon and Arnold, 1998]. However, portraits of effective instructors typically deal with the instruction itself (intellectual excitement) or with the interpersonal dimension (interpersonal rapport) [Lowman, 1994]. The interpersonal dimension should have the greater impact on fostering a positive student-faculty relationship.

### **III. LEARNING STYLES**

Learning style is the unique way each individual gathers and processes information. By understanding the large differences in learning styles among students, greater gains can be made in learning and students' reactions should be more positive.

Some instructors assume that teaching styles are appropriate for any audience [Diaz and Cartnal, 1999]. They determine teaching methods based on their preferences instead of designing a learning environment compatible with the learning styles of their students. [Rochetto et al., 1992]. However, Havita and Birenbaum [2000] found that students with particular learning needs preferred instructors who accommodate those needs. Therefore, a major use of learning style information is to correlate it with evaluations of the teaching techniques used [Dixon, 1982].

Although researchers have not reached consensus on a single learning style model, research results show that four qualitatively different learning styles can be discerned [Vermunt, 1996]. One learning style inventory, used widely with college students, is the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) [Kolb, 1985]. The LSI provides a two-dimensional view of the learning process in which one acquires knowledge by a series of steps through bipolar dimensions. It measures how much students rely on each of four learning modes: concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching and listening), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing). It has been used to help make career choices, solve problems, set goals, manage people, and deal with new situations, and it may be helpful to understand student-faculty relationships, as well.

### **IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The lack of research on student expectations of faculty members limits our insight into what constitutes positive student-faculty relationships. Furthermore, colleges may not encourage faculty members to develop better relationships with their students. Consequently, this exploratory study has three specific objectives:

1. To determine the number and type of factors students consider in developing a relationship with their professors.

2. To identify the level of expectations for these relationship dimensions.
3. To determine if students' learning styles are related to the type and degree of relationships that students desire with their professors.

## V. RESEARCH METHODOGY

Since no standardized scales exist that measure the relationships desired by students of their professors, it was necessary to develop scales that measure this "relationship" construct. First, several students were interviewed to define more precisely, what they want from professor relationships. The information from these interviews, combined with the findings and scale items from other studies [Rasor, 1981; Umble and Whitten, 1977; and Sauser, 1979], provided guidelines for developing relationship scale items.

The initial version of the relationship questionnaire contained 35 items. The instrument was pretested with 90 business students who commented on the scale items. Three through seven factors were extracted by using a common factor analysis algorithm. Based upon the eigen values, loadings, and communalities of the four-factor, varimax-rotated solution, it was judged the most appropriate factor structure and, consequently, the questionnaire was reduced to the 28 items that loaded on the four extracted factors.

The revised version of the questionnaire was pretested with another sample of 164 business students and an item analysis was conducted. Using the same criteria, the four-factor solution was again deemed best, as items loaded on the same dimensions as in the first pretest. Using Cronbach's alpha, internal consistency was assessed for each factor, resulting in an additional eight items being deleted. The final version of the survey instrument contained 20 relationship items. Students were to indicate their attitude about "what you want from a relationship with your professor" on a five-point, Likert-type agreement scale. In addition, Kolb's [1985] Learning-Style Inventory, which consists of 12 questions, was included. Students were asked to rank the four endings to each question according to "how well you think each one fits with how you would go about learning something." The questionnaire was administered to students in ten graduate and undergraduate marketing classes at a Midwestern, urban university. After 30 of the initial 273 respondents were eliminated because of extensive missing learning style data, the final data set contained responses from 243 students.

## VI. RESULTS

The same four dimensions were confirmed as all items had factor loadings of at least .35. The internal consistency of the four relationship scales was computed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients range from .56 to .79. According to Nunnally [1978, p. 245], modest coefficients in the range of .60 are acceptable in early stages of research. Table 1 includes the factors, the item means in descending factor loadings order, the percents of explained variance, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

The first factor contains five items, and was labeled *academic assistance* as all items address student attitudes about professors helping and assisting students. The second factor, labeled *individual respect*, contains four items that measure the amount of consideration and respect students want from their professors. The third factor contains seven items and was labeled *personalized treatment*. Each of the items gauges the

**Table 1. Student-Professor Relationship Dimensions**

Relationship Items <sup>a</sup>	Mean	Variance	Alpha
<b>Factor 1 - Academic Assistance</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>36.3%</b>	<b>.79</b>
Assist students who are having trouble	4.11		
Encourage students who are doing poorly	4.02		
Help students with special problems	3.84		
Express genuine interest in the students	4.09		
Feel welcome in seeking help from my professor	4.24		
<b>Factor 2 - Individual Respect</b>	<b>4.24</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>.70</b>
Feel respected as an individual in class	4.27		
Relate to students as individuals	4.09		
Be friendly toward the students	4.28		
Be in office during office hours	4.35		
<b>Factor 3 - Personalized Treatment</b>	<b>3.18</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>.70</b>
Meet with professor to get to know each other	2.86		
Would like professor to give me a business card	3.01		
Should make professor's home phone number available	2.94		
Counsel students regarding their careers	3.22		
Recognize and greet me outside the classroom	3.42		
Importance of exams & assignments should reflect student's preferences	3.47		
Make a point to know every student's name	3.31		
<b>Factor 4 - Classroom Interaction</b>	<b>3.51</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>.56</b>
Critique students during class	2.84		
Encourage class discussion	4.09		
Be able to express disagreement with professor	3.89		
Be graded on my contribution to class discussion	3.21		
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>69.0%</b>	

<sup>a</sup>Rated on a five-point, Likert-type scale, 1 = Disagree Strongly and 5 = Agree Strongly.

amount of personal treatment that students desire from their professors. The final factor measures the type of interaction and responses that students desire in the classroom. This four-item factor was named *classroom interaction*. The significantly different means among the four sub-scale sum scores suggest that students have the highest expectations for *individual respect* (4.24), followed by *academic assistance* (4.06), *classroom interaction* (3.51), and *personalized treatment* (3.18).

Cronbach's alphas for the four learning style dimensions range from .80 to .87, coefficients that are higher than Kolb [1985] obtained (.73 to .83), indicating acceptable reliability. The learning style scores measure how much students rely on each of the four learning modes. Significant correlations between students' learning style abilities and the

types of relationships they want from their professors indicate that students with concrete experience strengths are likely to want *personalized treatment* ( $p < .01$ ) and *classroom interaction* ( $p < .02$ ) from faculty members. However, students who rely on reflective observation to learn are not as likely to want *classroom interaction* ( $p < .01$ ) and *individual respect* ( $p < .05$ ). Students who display abstract conceptualization or active experimentation learning strengths do not consistently express high or low expectations with respect to student-professor relationship dimensions.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The two relationship dimensions (*academic assistance* and *individual respect*) that account for the most explained variance and have the highest expectations measure more traditional expectations of professors. The two dimensions that explain less of the variance and have lower expectations (*personalized treatment* and *classroom interaction*), are associated more closely with proactive tenets of relationship building. For a professor to adopt a relationship-building orientation to classroom teaching, traditional *academic assistance* and *individual respect* are necessary but probably not sufficient conditions for success. It appears that faculty should offer *personalized treatment* and engage in *classroom interaction* with students as well.

Professor expectations are consistent across the four relationship dimensions for students with abstract conceptualization and active experimentation learning strengths (thinking and doing), the two most likely orientations for business students [Kolb, 1985]. However, those students who rely more on observations and reflections (watching) to learn may not respond positively to relationship efforts. Since they prefer to watch and reflect on classroom experiences from many perspectives., *classroom interaction* is a poor fit with their preferred learning style. Examining these students on structured questions is favored [Ronchetto et al., 1992]. Reflective observation learners are more likely in fields of study such as law enforcement, secretarial, and the arts, and in the minority in business classes [Kolb, 1985]. Students with concrete experience learning strengths (feeling) have higher expectations regarding *personalized treatment* and *classroom interaction*. They should respond well to relationship building efforts. These students often choose fields of study such as psychology and are more likely than watchers to enroll in a business class.

Based upon the results of this study, students want a multidimensional relationship with their professors. Faculty who offer *personalized treatment* and engage in *classroom interaction*, in addition to providing academic assistance and *individual respect*, should make a contribution to building a relationship with their students. These efforts should be a positive step toward enhancing student relationships with the university. Yet to be determined is the effect such retention strategies will have on course evaluations, student performance and retention, and longer-term relationships with the university.

A limitation of this exploratory study was the use of a convenience sample. Nonprobability sampling is used when it is impractical to use random sampling techniques [Diaz and Carnal, 1999]. The results should be considered as tentative and may not apply to other university settings. This instrument should be administered in a variety of classroom settings, with larger sample sizes, and the data analyzed with multivariate statistical methods to validate the results.

## VIII. REFERENCES

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