Student Entitlement: Truth, Fiction, or Some of Both

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Survey Instruments that Measure Student Entitlement


Theoretical basis: Based on a construct of expectations for high grades for modest effort and demanding attitudes towards teachers.

Sample items:

- If I have explained to my professor that I am trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my course grade.
- If I have completed most of the reading for a class, I deserve a B in the course.
- Teachers often give me lower grades than I deserve on paper assignments.
- Professors who won’t let me take an exam at a different time because of my personal plans (e.g. vacation or other trip that is important to me) are too strict.
- I would think poorly of a professor who didn’t respond the same day to an e-mail I sent.
- If I’m not happy with my grade...the professor should allow me to do an additional assignment.
- Professors have no right to be annoyed with me if I tend to come late to class or tend to leave early.
- A professor should be willing to meet with me at a time that works best for me, even if inconvenient for the professor.


Theoretical basis: *Externalized responsibility* as in showing a lack of responsibility for one’s education and *entitled expectation* as in showing entitled expectations about professors and their course policies.

Sample externalized responsibility items

- It is unnecessary for me to participate in class when the professor is paid for teaching, not for asking questions.
- I believe that the university does not provide me with the resources I need to succeed in college.
- If I do poorly in a course and I could not make the professor’s office hours, the fault lies with my professor.
- For group assignments, it is acceptable to take a back seat and let others do most of the work if I am busy.

Sample entitled expectation items

- My professors are obligated to help me prepare for exams.
- Professors must be entertaining to be good.
- I should never receive a zero on an assignment that I turned in.


Theoretical basis: students as customers

Sample items:

- If I don’t do well on a test, the professor should make tests easier or curve grades.
- If I am struggling in a class, the professor should approach me and offer to help.
- I am a product of my environment. Therefore, if I do poorly in class, it is not my fault.
- I should be given the opportunity to make up a test, regardless of the reason for the absence.
- I’m paying for my classes, so I should be able to skip class without a grade penalty.


Theoretical basis: “Entitlement, in general, explains differing reactions to unfairness; an academic entitlement scale might best be developed out of a theory of reactions to (un)fairness, like equity theory.” (p. 655)

Sample items (adapted from a previously developed Equity Preference Questionnaire)

- I am most satisfied in my classes when I have to do as little as possible.
- When I am in class, I think of ways to get out of my assignments.
- It is the smart students who gets as much as they can while giving as little as possible in return.
- If I had to work hard all day for my classes, I would probably quit.
Activities Using the Measures of Academic Entitlement

Select one of the instruments and use it to solicit feedback from your students. Or assemble a collection of items and solicit student feedback. If you create your own collection or reword any of the items, your findings cannot be compared with those reported in the research, but if the items are of interest to you, then use them to find out the extent and kind of entitlement among your students.

Here’s what can be done with the results.

- Use them for your own edification. Are your students as entitled as you thought they were? Do they have entitled attitudes about certain aspects of their education and are there ways you can use policies and practices that would change their expectations in those areas?
- Share the results with students and use them to facilitate a discussion of entitlement, focusing on how the attitudes and beliefs associated with it compromise what can be gained from a college education.
- Show students their results and compare them with results reported in the study. This necessitates using items that were used in the research. Where are there difference? How might they be explained?
- Compare students’ results with yours. This can be a contention conversation, especially in light of strong faculty views as to the impropriety of most entitled attitudes. To avoid a conversation that pits your beliefs against their, you might ask a number of colleagues to the institution to respond to the items. Then you can share data from a number of faculty at your institution.

Use some of the items from the instruments as discussion starters. Put students in groups and give them several to discuss. They could be encouraged to first discuss their views of the item and then discussion how they think most of their teachers would view the items.

For an extra credit assignment, have students read and report (in class, on the course website) on the results of one of these studies. Research articles aren’t always easy for students to read, especially beginning ones, so it might be helpful to direct them to several sections of the articles or provide a set of questions they answer about the research.
Scenarios to Facilitate Discussions of Student Entitlement

These scenarios focus on common entitlement issues and can be used to structure discussions with students. More and different perspectives might be heard if students first respond to the scenarios individually and then discuss them in small groups. Each group could then be called up to provide a majority and minority response to the vignette.

As noted in the program, the definition of entitlement is widely accepted. But what beliefs and actions exemplify it is another matter. The responses the responses to the scenarios that, in large measure, determine whether they’re being answered with an entitled attitude or whether, in certain cases, the student might have a legitimate issue. Students could start by discussing those responses that would illustrate entitled attitudes and those where the student may have legitimate concerns.

The scenarios can be responded to taking different perspectives. You could students to identify and discuss options: “What could you do/say?” If you’d like students to discuss the ethical implications of an option or the collection of them, the question could be, “What should you say/do?” If, the goal is to get individual students to explore their attitudes and responses, the question could be, “What would you do in this situation?”

It’s also possible to use scenarios like this to explore the differences between how faculty and students respond to the scenarios. If you share how you think students should respond to each, but that could make the exchange confrontational. You can keep your beliefs out of the conversation by taking the group’s recommendation as to what should be said or done and then asking them to anticipate how professors would respond to their recommended response. Then you could explain how you think most of your colleagues would respond. Be sure to focus on why that would be the faculty response.

Another option for concluding a discussion of entitlement might be to talk about what paying for college does entitle students to—in fact that’s a discussion faculty ought to be having with each other. An opportunity to learn from experts who know the content and how to teach it? A safe environment in which to explore ideas? Learning that is supported by faculty committed to student learning? A chance to learn in a community where diversity is celebrated?

The Scenarios

Final grades for your intro psych course have just been posted. Your grade is a B+. You are only three points from an A-. It’s a required course, unrelated to your major and not at all interesting to you. You do not understand why the university makes you take these courses. However, in order to keep your scholarship, you need to keep your GPA up. You’ve decided to go see the prof and ask him to bump your grade up.
You’re taking a course in which the professor has very detailed requirements for the papers. She indicates font size and type, margin size, and electronic submission format. She wants papers submitted via the LMS by a certain time on the due date. You forgot and emailed yours to her directly. It’s come back to you and the prof has given you a zero because you didn’t follow the instructions. You’re considering your options.

Your grandmother’s 80th birthday is fast approaching and your family is planning a special event at her favorite restaurant. You want to attend, but the birthday dinner is Thursday night and to get there in time you must leave at noon. Here’s the problem: one of the three major tests in econ is scheduled for 2:30 in the afternoon. You’ve decided you’ll ask the prof to let you make up the exam when you return.

You are taking a math course and it is really hard. You don’t like math and usually don’t do well in math classes. But you need a good grade because it’s a course that’s required for your major, so you are trying hard. So far, you haven’t missed a class. You tried to do the homework problems but they aren’t like the problems he does in class. You’ve gone to the Learning Center three times—all that and you still got a C on the first exam. Given how hard you’re working, that’s grade is unrealistic. You’ve decided to go see the professor.

You’re in a class with a huge textbook and long readings are assigned every night. The prof mostly lectures but rarely talks about what’s in the textbook, other than regularly telling the class to do the reading. You have tried to do the reading, but it’s very boring so you didn’t get through much of it until the night before the exam. At that point there was so much to read, you ended up not being able to remember much of it. There were all sorts of questions from the textbook on the exam and you missed most of them. You’re angry.

The course is hard. You’re spending way more time on it than any of your other courses. You studied every day the week before the exam and your hard work paid off. You got one of the top grades which made you very happy until the prof went over the exam. Students started arguing about how they should receive partial credit if they had some of the solution correct. The professor started backing down and pretty soon students were getting credit for all sorts of little things, even when they missed the answer. You know these students. They aren’t working hard on the class. They share solutions to the homework. Now they’re getting test grades they don’t deserve. It’s very upsetting.
For Further Reflection and Discussion

Here’s some quotations that merit further discussion along with some questions that can be used to promote more thinking about interesting aspects and implications of student entitlement.

“Understanding academic entitlement and its elements can better prepare instructors for dealing with their students. Specifically, preempting tendencies to externalize responsibility and hold unreasonable expectations, instructors can emphasize the student’s role in his/her own grade and success, clearly articulating what is expected of the student and what can be expected of the instructor.”


*Is clarifying expectations an effective approach to changing entitled attitudes?*

“Customer behavior...does not translate well to higher education even though it may make sense in the broader context. Higher education is a unique endeavor in that students pay not for a tangible product so much as for an opportunity to acquire knowledge and, ultimately perhaps, a degree that is tangible on some level. While our participants agreed that attending class and reading are their responsibilities as students, they expressed feelings that attending and reading should result in credit or passing, regardless of performance.”


*Does paying tuition entitle students to anything beyond the opportunity to learn? If so, what?*

“In their widely cited tome, *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) asserted that attending university or college exerts a lifetime impact on students, ranging from income to politics. However, to date there has been little research into how students affect higher education. Meanwhile, it is becoming clear that this street runs both ways. Students are not passive recipients of education; rather they are active participants in the shaping of contemporary higher education. As active participants, they exert an influence as consumers who are purchasing the commodity of higher education thus creating the phenomenon of student entitlement.”

What might be examples of how students are affecting the shape of higher education?

Should the street run both ways—college affecting students, for life and students affecting the higher education experience?

Does educational consumerism contribute to entitlement? What specifically does it contribute?

“What are the circumstances that foster the behavior and attitudes of academic self-entitlement: i.e., expectations of high rewards for modest effort, expectations of special consideration and accommodation by teachers when it comes to grades, and impatience and anger when their expectations and perceived needs are not met?” P. 1194


Are there instructional policies and practices that promote the sense of entitlement? What are they?

What’s the right balance between accommodations that promote learning and accommodations that reinforce entitled behaviors?