Student Expectations

As Dean, one of my most important tasks is to conduct third-year and tenure reviews of the Carleton faculty. As part of each review, we poll about 150 students and graduates about the faculty member’s teaching and we get about a 40-45% return rate. Along with the faculty member’s self-assessment and senior colleagues’ visits to classes, these student evaluations form the centerpiece of our attempt to assess the effectiveness of the faculty member’s teaching. The questionnaire we use is fairly simple: after asking which courses were taken from the faculty member under review, it asks, “By what criteria do you form your judgment about whether or not a faculty member is serving effectively at Carleton?” It then goes on to ask, “Measured by these criteria, what are this faculty member’s strengths?” and “what are this person’s weaknesses?”

I’ve liked this form because I believe that when students define their own criteria for effective teaching, I have a much better sense of what they mean when they talk about a particular professor’s strengths and weaknesses. In three years as Dean, I figure I have read about 2,400 of these evaluation forms, which gives me a pretty good window into what students think effective teaching is. I want to share here what I think I’ve learned. Of course, my sources are Carleton students and recent graduates, but I’m sure that in most ways they are very much like students at all the ACM colleges; they are highly motivated, bright, and curious.

So—what do students think is effective teaching? The first, perhaps most important observation to make is that there is a huge range of opinion among students about good teaching. The old adage is true: no one can please everyone all the time. Another question on our form asks students to name the best teachers they have had at Carleton. What strikes me most about the answers I have seen to this question is the huge array of names that are cited—almost every faculty member’s name has come up at least once on these lists. Of course, some names come up repeatedly, but even among the oft-mentioned group there are very different teaching styles, methods, and personalities represented, often on the same student’s list.

So the most basic conclusion I would draw is that faculty members should be themselves; they should strive to develop effective techniques and responses within their own teaching persona. When I was about to teach my first class as a second-year graduate student, an experienced T.A. told me the most important thing to do was to establish my authority in the classroom. Thank goodness I did not try to heed his advice! My own style is not at all authoritarian and if I’d tried to be so, the results would have been disastrous.

The kind of authority that is important, however, is the authority of knowledge, of mastery of the subject. Carleton students often list this as a criterion of effective teaching, but just as often they take it for granted. I guess that’s good, since they rarely run across a faculty member who does not seem knowledgeable in the field. More important to them, then, is the ability to convey one’s knowledge clearly and in an organized fashion. This is
a desire not just for “good notes” but for clear and accessible explanations. In any complex field (from quantum mechanics to social theory) students value the ability to explain something in several different ways. They believe that the best teachers are those who can use a number of different analogies or approaches, at the spur of the moment, to help promote understanding. On the other hand, if a faculty member can’t answer a question, students do not respect guessing or bypassing it; they value an honest “I don’t know”—as long as they get the answer at the beginning of the next class meeting.

Students understand that faculty often must address a range of abilities and aptitudes in a single class and so must aim for somewhere in the middle. This problem is particularly acute in such courses as calculus, principles of economics, or lower-level science courses that are taken by both potential majors and non-majors. Faculty therefore must, according to one student, “strike a balance between moving so quickly none of the class can follow and taking too much class time (as opposed to office hour time) to explain a concept which all but one or two people understand.” This is always a delicate and sometimes unattainable balance, but one that requires continual striving and fine-tuning.

Perhaps the most highly valued classroom quality is enthusiasm for the subject and the capacity to convey and inspire enthusiasm. Students want to know what is interesting and exciting about the material to the professor. As one student said, “In my experience if a professor seems genuinely enthusiastic about the subject, the students are more highly motivated.”

Students also want to believe that professors are enthusiastic about teaching and about helping students learn. The same student went on to say, “I know that an enthusiastic professor truly wants me to understand and appreciate his or her subject. Therefore, I know that extra effort in this class will be rewarded.”

Caring about student learning can come across in many ways. Students often talk about it as respect for students:

- “Respect must be shown by taking time to thoughtfully comment on students’ work . . . and returning work with reasonable promptness.” Students are understandably unhappy if they do not get comments on their papers—even if they get a high grade.
- Respect also is shown by keeping office hours and being available to help with problems.
- Respect is shown to students by learning their names. I’ve been interested to note how many times students comment favorably about pros who learn their names early on—and who keep greeting them by name even after the course is over.
- And students put a very high premium on 1) respect for their ideas; and 2) encouragement of a diversity of ideas, in and out of class. They want to know where the professor stands on an issue, but they do not want to feel that there is a required orthodoxy within a course. They value very highly a classroom atmosphere where disagreement is possible and even encouraged, and uncomfortable discussion is not avoided—as long as the professor can maintain
an atmosphere of civility and honest inquiry. As one student said, “If a student is able to provide supporting evidence, any viewpoint should be accepted in the classroom, even if it is uncomfortable for the professor.”

- Sometimes students can be unrealistic in their ideas of respect. I was struck by the student who wrote, perfectly seriously, that the most important criterion for a faculty member was “complete respect for students as fully equal adults.” He seemed unaware that late adolescence is a stage of life between childhood and adulthood, with its own needs as well as strengths. But of course he was right that teachers must respect their students intellectually and emotionally; “condescending” is a criticism of the worst order.

- Fairness is an essential part of respect from the students’ point of view: they want fair tests, fair grading, and no show of favoritism in class. This last is a little tricky, it seems, because they can interpret allowing talkative students to dominate a discussion class as a show of favoritism. This is one reason to try to draw out as many students as possible and equalize “air time” as much as you can.

- High standards are a very important show of respect for students and one that Carleton students definitely want. Sometimes new faculty seem afraid that imposing rigorous expectations and upholding high standards in grading student work will alienate students (and the downside of our soliciting all these wonderful student evaluations is that for some faculty they loom as a popularity contest; some faculty fear that rigor might produce “negative” comments, which might in turn doom them). But this should not be the case at all. On the contrary, I find that students intensely dislike “easy grading” or material pitched at too low a level or too slow a pace. They want to be challenged; they don’t like a science or social science teacher who “sticks too close to the text” without bringing in new examples, ideas, or approaches. One student’s criterion was “Do I think about issues raised in class during the rest of the day or week?” Students don’t want impossible reading lists, or tests that no one in the class can finish, but they definitely want to be challenged and helped to meet high levels of achievement. Perhaps coaching is a relevant metaphor here.

This helpfulness is the key factor. Carleton students believe that caring about student learning translates into willingness to spend time with them to help them understand difficult concepts, or solve problems, or improve their writing. I’ve already mentioned office hours. Students want a lot of office hours, and they also want permission to call during non-office hours or at home, because they want to find help whenever they need it. The adjectives of praise that probably show up most often on these forms are things like “available,” “approachable,” “friendly,” “helpful,” “open to questions,” and “made me feel there is no such thing as a stupid question.” Damning complaints include coldness or distraction during office hours, “intimidating,” “unavailable,” or “impatient.”

Sometimes I worry that individual attention to students—which is, after all, one of the great strengths of all of us at small colleges—is sometimes a disadvantage, too, for I’m concerned that this individual attention will devour our faculty; as a demand from students it seems like a bottomless pit. One student even wrote on his evaluation that he takes office hours for granted; his real criterion for dedicated teaching is that the
professor is in his office and available for many hours outside of office hours! We do need to educate students to accept limits and to understand that faculty need to have a life outside of their teaching (and that late night phone calls may not be acceptable!). We also need to continue to be creative in making student help time more efficient, perhaps in group sessions, such as review sessions or, in math, science, or economics, problem-solving sessions. Another idea which worked for one faculty member who was finding that students dropped into his lab too often, just to chat as well as to ask for help, was to add a “social credit” component to his grading scheme. He told his students that he was available in office hours and in his lab if they needed help with something; he would also like to get to know them a little bit socially, and since he always had to eat lunch and take a coffee break now and then, each of them should invite him to lunch or coffee once during the term. He said they enjoyed this and it really did cut down on the social talk in his office—and he accomplished it without telling them NOT to chat during office hours, which he knew would have turned them off.

What about teaching methods—lectures? discussions? student presentations? While students always appreciate a good lecture—one that is clear, organized, interesting, dynamic, and mind-stretching in some way—they also like to be involved in the class too. This can be done many ways, through innovative interactive techniques even in very large lectures (for example, simple but engaging experiments or calculations to be done at one’s seat, handed out in kits in advance, for a science class) or through mixing discussion or other interactive activities with the lecture. Students seem to enjoy group work and they very much like the chance to express and develop their own ideas. Carleton students seem particularly eager at the moment to get help learning how to make oral presentations, perhaps in preparation for job interviews or for work they realize will require public speaking, so they are glad to have oral assignments. At the same time, they do not like a laissez faire attitude toward discussion and oral reports. They criticize faculty who let students ramble or circle redundantly through a discussion and they do not like a professor who avoids expressing his or her own point of view; they want guidance and direction in a discussion. And they want good coaching for oral presentations; they resent other students’ talks if they think they are a waste of time. Providing direction and freedom at the same time is difficult (one faculty member requires groups to videotape themselves in advance of their class presentation), but when one succeeds the rewards are very high.

When I talk with faculty about these student questionnaires—and the faculty under review do read them, with names deleted, and then we discuss them—I find that some of the problems (particularly the surprises) seem to come from situations where students have not understood what faculty are trying to do pedagogically. I have concluded that faculty should talk with students more about their teaching goals and techniques, as well as about the subject matter. As I’ve reflected on my own teaching style, I realize that I used to transfer to my teaching my strong feeling about my writing—as a writer I aspire to be subtle and elegant, NOT to dwell on mechanics or organization or too-obvious signposts of transition. In the past, I wanted my teaching to work in the same way—sweeping the students along, as good writing would. Now I am convinced I was wrong. I now believe that the more students understand the process of teaching and learning, the
more they will be engaged in the process and the material, and the more rewarding they will find the learning experience to be.

I haven’t mentioned faculty scholarship but I don’t want to leave it out, much less imply by its absence that students don’t appreciate it. Some students list “scholarly contributions to their field” as a criterion of effectiveness. But they almost always say they want faculty who definitely put teaching first. And they are very alienated if they think a faculty member is absent or ill-prepared for class, or unavailable or distracted during office hours, because of the demands of or commitment to research. However, they are delighted to learn about faculty research in relevant ways through their classes—as a topic of inquiry, a source of examples, as part of a reading assignment, or, in sciences particularly, if they can conduct a related experiment or use the equipment involved.

But scholarly activity is more important to teaching than many students understand. I believe it is terribly important for faculty to incorporate their scholarly work into their teaching somehow: it is one of the best ways to show their enthusiasm for the subject and to reveal themselves as continuing learners in the field. It is also terribly important that faculty not let the demands of teaching crowd out scholarship. For if one does not remain actively engaged in one’s discipline, how can one hope to remain a vital and exciting teacher over what will probably be a 30-to 35-year career? Teaching is the time and devotion you give to your current students; scholarship is your investment in your students 10 or 15 years down the road.

I’ve gone on too long, but I want to sum up these remarks by quoting one of the most memorable comments I’ve read on a student evaluation form. Giving the highest possible praise to a superb teacher, known for her high standards and her unstinting helpfulness to students, a student wrote, “She is a teacher in the best Carleton tradition: utterly demanding, utterly giving, and utterly fair.” What more could a student ask?!