

# Student Perceptions Of Appropriate Classroom Policies Of College Professors

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## ABSTRACT

*Student perceptions of classroom management practices and policies employed by college educators have not been widely studied. Faculty have broad discretion to determine classroom management practices and policies, and faculty are generally evaluated at least annually with student evaluations of teaching as a significant component of the evaluative process. The focus of this paper is whether students perceive faculty as having the freedom or discretion to adopt specified behaviors or policies unrelated to course content decisions.*

**Keywords:** Academic Freedom, Academic Integrity, College Student Attitudes, College Teachers, Ethics, Academia

## INTRODUCTION

Classroom management practices and policies employed by college educators vary widely, and often ultimately depend on the nature or type of class, as well as the instructors' personal experiences and preferences. Over time, a professor may begin to habitually adopt certain practices pertaining to examinations, attendance policies, classroom style, grading, etc. due to what has worked best in a particular class in the past. As academicians mature as professionals, so do their strategies related to becoming effective educators and getting the most from their students.

At the same time, college professors are generally evaluated at least annually by their department chairperson or other school administrators for purposes of determining eligibility for contract renewal, merit pay increases, promotion and/or tenure. Despite some concerns about their validity, student evaluations of teaching are frequently a significant component of the data compiled and used in the evaluative process. As a result, faculty members can feel the need to obtain good evaluations from students, which in turn may influence a faculty member's classroom management practices. If and when these policies or behavior are implemented solely to manipulate student responses, student perceptions of such classroom policies or faculty behavior may become influential. Student perceptions of classroom policies and faculty conduct arguably can be a factor in academic freedom.

The concept of academic freedom is steeped in history, with its origin being traced back to ancient Greek times. Much more recently, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities) issued the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. According to the statement,

*Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.*

*Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research... Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.*

It has been suggested but not necessarily accepted that academic freedom has become a legal right derived from the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. As such, it deserves respect and should be protected absent a substantial overriding principle. However, what falls within the reach of academic freedom is not always clear. Conventional wisdom is that academic freedom applies to choice and discussion of subject matter content in teaching and research. According to the AAUP's *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, "[t]eachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject." It is understood that faculty members do have more independence than employees in most other occupations. College professors have the academic freedom to decide their course objectives and the pedagogy by which they may be achieved (Cahn 1990). It is not clear whether the concept of academic freedom applies to faculty adoption of specific behaviors, policies and procedures.

Not only does a professor have a moral responsibility for the content of what is taught, but also for the methods by which content is taught and the everyday interactions with students. Research has been published about professors' influence on students (See Jackson et al 1993). Hansen states, "[a]ny action a teacher undertakes in the classroom is capable of expressing moral meaning that, in turn, can influence students" (2001 p286). A concern arises because students may be unaware or confused about moral standards that are expected in the classroom, as well as the workplace. The confusion may exist because faculty are not in universal agreement about ethical standards, expectations and norms that are appropriate, for students or for themselves (Van Valey 2001), and because professors lack awareness of the moral impact they have on students (Van Valey 2001). Faculty actions and interactions with students help to shape student perceptions of morality and ethics. The academic instructor's approach, including what is emphasized in the classroom and at other times, and the instructor's approach to ethical phenomena in everyday life, sends signals to students about what conduct is ethical or undesirable (Colnerud, 2006). Not only does a professor have a moral responsibility for the content of what is taught, but also for the methods by which content is taught and the everyday interactions with students. Van Valey recommends that faculty members "be made aware of the possibility that some students are simply not cognizant of the standards of behavior that faculty members routinely apply in their classrooms" (pp 6-7).

Ethics has long been a concern of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB), which is the premier accrediting agency for undergraduate and graduate degree programs in business administration and accounting (AACSB 1). The Association's accreditation standards specify that "...ethical behavior is paramount to the delivery of quality business education" (AACSB 2). The AACSB also issued a report in 2004 urging faculty and administrators to "explore alternative approaches and models for developing the design, delivery, and evaluation of business ethics education" (Ethics 2004). Much has been written about business ethics education and there has been a renewed interest since the Enron, Worldcom, and other recent business scandals. Prior research on business ethics education indicates that faculty do and should serve as ethical role models for students (e.g., O'Neil, 1983; Greenfield, 1998; Bruhn, et al, 2002). However, little has been written about student perceptions of ethical and appropriate behavior by faculty, and there are "no universally recognized set of standards defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct on the part of faculty. The practices of academic freedom and autonomy protect a host of actions and inactions." (Bruh, Zajc, et al, 2002). It is for these reasons the authors embarked upon this research project.

This paper does not address whether academic freedom is limited to subject matter content choices. Rather, the focus of this paper is whether students perceive faculty as having the freedom or discretion to adopt specified behaviors or policies unrelated to subject matter decisions. Several studies have been conducted on the topic of faculty perceptions of behaviors and policies protected by academic freedom and their degree of appropriateness. However, a literature search on the topic of student perceptions of faculty behaviors and policies yielded few recently published empirical research articles (Kuther, 2003; Morgan & Korschgen, 2001; Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, & Allen, 1993; Oldenburg, 2005), and none that addressed the issue of student perceptions of faculty

academic freedom. The majority of research on student perceptions of faculty behavior focuses on topics such as sexual harassment (Morgan, Korschgen, 2001). Oldenburg's research does focus on student perceptions of ethical dilemmas involving professors, and specifically examines the role of the students' and faculty members' gender in these perceptions. He concludes there is a "tendency for women to rate actions of professors as more unethical than men did" and "the gender of a professor can play a significant role in how behavior is interpreted" (p 135). Oldenburg indicates these conclusions may not have universal application because the number and scope of scenarios was limited. This indicated to the researchers that the topic of faculty behavior related to classroom practices, policies and procedures was ripe for exploration.

## **METHOD**

The authors recently undertook a study to ascertain whether students at a mid-sized Midwestern liberal arts institution believed a number of hypothetical instructor-initiated classroom management scenarios would fall within the purview of academic freedom, and whether the proposed action would be ethical. The scenarios were organized into six categories; 1) grading policies and procedures, 2) accessibility and availability policies, 3) classroom management practices, 4) attendance and participation rules, 5) assignment, quiz and exam practices, and 6) differential treatment issues. Specifically, the authors described 42 classroom practices, course policies, and faculty/student scenarios and asked respondents to indicate whether the hypothetical professor in the scenario had the academic freedom or discretion to adopt the description policy or practice. Students were instructed to mark the "No" (no freedom/discretion) column if the student thought the hypothetical professor should be subject to disciplinary action or not protected for adopting the described behavior or policy. The scenarios are reprinted in the Appendix. The order in which the scenarios were presented to respondents in the survey was random; however, the scenarios were later grouped for analysis and have been renumbered for ease of presentation in this paper.

The last part of the survey asked eleven demographic questions. The following letters are associated with each demographic question and correspond to the column headings found in Tables 1 and 2. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate:

- G/UG: Whether they were a graduate or an undergraduate student,
- GP: What program they were in, if they were a graduate student (MBA/MBA-HSAD, MPA)
- UM: What their major was, if they were an undergraduate student (accounting, finance, health services administration, management, and marketing)
- UGL: What their undergraduate grade level was, if they were an undergraduate student (sophomore, junior, senior)
- GPA: What range their overall grade point average fell in (3.51 – 4.00, 3.01 – 3.50, 3.00 or less),
- G: Whether they were male or female,
- A: What age range they were in (21 or younger, 22 – 24, over 24),
- R: Their race (White, Other = Asian, Pacific Islander or Black),
- T/NT: Whether they were a traditional or a nontraditional student.
- PT: Whether they considered themselves to have an easy-going or competitive personality type.
- EA: Whether or not they were involved in university-sponsored extracurricular activities.

The student survey was administered during the spring 2006 semester to undergraduate and graduate accounting, business and health services administration students at the same mid-sized Midwestern liberal arts institution. Students in upper division business and health services courses were surveyed. Participation was voluntary and students were assured their individual responses would remain confidential. A total of 205 student surveys were administered, of which 201 were completed and usable.

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

Statistical tests were conducted for each of the 42 scenarios to determine if there were significant differences in responses based on an individual's demographic response. Fisher's exact test was used for the 2x2

contingency tables, while the chi-square test of independence was used for larger contingency tables. Overall, 49 statistically significant differences were found, which are described more fully below.

As shown in the cross-tabulation in Table 1, the following significant differences were observed by scenario category and demographic category.

**Table 1  
Demographic Category**

Scenario	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA	Total
1	0	0	1	0	2	2	3	2	2	1	0	13
2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	5
3	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	6
4	1	0	1	1	4	0	0	2	2	0	0	11
5	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	1	0	2	10
6	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>
<b>Total</b>	4	1	2	2	10	3	6	7	10	1	3	49

Summarized in Table 2 below, according to question category, are the results associated with the statistical tests. A single asterisk (\*) indicates a 0.10 level of significance, two asterisks (\*\*) indicate a 0.05 level of significance, and three asterisks (\*\*\*) indicate a 0.01 level of significance. In total, 49 tests resulted in statistically significant differences. Twenty-one of these tests were significant at 0.10, another 21 were significant at 0.05, and 7 were significant at the 0.01 level of significance.

**Table 2**

**Grading Policies and Procedures**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
1											
2											
3							**		*		
4					***			***			
5			**				**		*		
6											
7						**					
8											
9							*				
10					**	**		*		**	

**Accessibility/Availability Policies**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
11											
12											
13					**						
14					***			***	*		
15									**		

Table 2 continued

**Classroom Management Practices**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
16						*					
17		**			**						
18							*				
19									*		
20											
21									*		

**Attendance/Participation Rules**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
22	**		**		*						
23								*	*		
24				*	**			**			
25									*		
26											
27					*						
28					*						

**Assignment, Quiz and Exam Practices**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
29								**			
30											*
31								**			
32				*			***		**		**
33											
34											
35	**						**				
36	*										

**Differential Treatment**

	G/UG	GP	UM	UGL	GPA	G	A	R	T/NT	PT	EA
37											
38											
39	*				*				***		***
40											
41											
42											

Several of the significant differences in Table 2 are highlighted in the discussion that follows.

Consider the responses based on the overall grade point average and race demographics for scenario 4. It states, The professor consistently and uniformly adheres to the (written) policy that in no event and under no circumstances will any student be allowed to earn extra credit.

- Students with overall grade point averages in the 3.51 – 4.00 range responded that a professor should have the freedom or discretion to adopt this behavior more than what one would expect under the assumption of independence. In contrast, students with overall grade point averages of 3.00 or less, indicated quite strongly that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .000)

- Students who indicated that their race was “White” indicated that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than expected, while students who indicated that their race was “Other” (Asian, Pacific Islander, or Black) indicated more than expected that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .001)

Scenario 10 states, “The professor agrees to pass a failing student as long as the student agrees to not take a class from the professor again.” Significant differences were observed for four of the demographic questions: overall grade point average, gender, race, and easy-going versus competitive personality type.

- Students with overall grade point averages in the 3.51 – 4.00 range responded that a professor should not have the freedom or discretion to adopt this behavior more than what one would expect under the assumption of independence. Students with overall grade point averages of 3.00 or less, responded more than expected that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .033)
- Male students responded that the professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than what one would expect, while female students responded more than expected that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .013)
- Students who indicated that their race was “White” indicated that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than expected, while students who indicated that their race was “Other” (Asian, Pacific Islander, or Black) indicated more than expected that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .085)
- Students who indicated that their personality type was “Easy-going” indicated that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than expected, while students who indicated that their personality type was “Competitive” indicated more than expected that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .034)

Scenario 14 states, “The professor announces a job opportunity to only a select few good advisees.” Significant differences were observed for overall grade point average, race, and for traditional versus non-traditional students.

- Students with overall grade point averages in the 3.51 – 4.00 range indicated quite strongly that a professor should have the freedom or discretion to adopt this behavior more than what one would expect under the assumption of independence. Students with overall grade point averages of 3.00 or less, indicated more than expected that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .000)
- Students who indicated that their race was “White” indicated that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than expected, while students who indicated that their race was “Other” (Asian, Pacific Islander, or Black) strongly indicated that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .003)
- Traditional students responded that a professor should not have the freedom to adopt this behavior more than expected, while nontraditional students indicated more than expected that a professor should have the freedom to adopt this behavior. (p-value = .095)

## **CONCLUSION**

These data provide a snapshot of a mid-sized Midwestern liberal arts institution’s student perceptions of the appropriateness of selected classroom practices, course policies, and faculty/student scenarios, as well as whether such practices, policies, and specified behaviors fall within the faculty members academic freedom and discretion to adopt. Certain classroom practices, policies and behavior of faculty were considered by students to be inappropriate, and in a number of instances, differences in appropriateness depended upon a student’s response to a demographic question. The study’s findings suggest that college students believe in general that while faculty do have discretion to adopt appropriate classroom practices, the power is not absolute. Several demographic differences help explain the majority of variation in what students find to be appropriate, including grade point average, self-defined traditional versus nontraditional classification, age, and race. However, gender, graduate versus undergraduate distinction, program/major and year in school resulted in few reported differences. Understanding how different

groups of students may respond to different practices may help the professor avoid practices that will cause students to react in a negative fashion, which may ultimately improve student evaluation of the faculty member's teaching and courses.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Grading Policies and Procedures:**

1. The professor allows students to keep all graded exams, and commonly includes some of the old test questions on the final exam. Prior to the final, the professor comments in class that a good way for students to study for the exam is to review old test material.
2. The professor allows students to keep all graded exams, and commonly includes some of the old test questions on the final exam. The professor mentions to students who stop by seeking individual help for the final that a good way to study is to review old exams.
3. The professor awards extra-credit points to students who attend "extra" events such as research presentations and seminars conducted by invited professionals, even though not all students can attend due to class or work conflicts, etc.
4. The professor consistently and uniformly adheres to the (written) policy that in no event and under no circumstances will any student be allowed to earn extra credit.
5. The professor generally requires students to take the final exam when scheduled. Students who miss the test because of travel plans are given an "Incomplete" grade, and are allowed to take a make-up test after they return.
6. The professor does not require those students who suffer a tragedy near the end of the semester to take the final exam.
7. The professor requires all students to take the final exam when scheduled. Students who miss the test because of travel plans are given a zero, and are not allowed to take a make-up test either before they leave or after they return.
8. The professor has no written policy regarding extra credit work and makes no mention of a policy in class. Unbeknownst to the rest of the class, however, the professor gives the opportunity to earn extra points to students who ask.
9. The professor teaching the second of two required sequential courses agrees to pass a failing student who has failed the class previously and who promises not to take any advanced classes in the discipline.
10. The professor agrees to pass a failing student as long as the student agrees to not take a class from the professor again.

### **Accessibility/Availability Policies:**

11. The professor announces a job opportunity to the entire class.
12. The professor agrees to be a job reference for any student who asks.
13. The professor provides extra tutoring for student athletes outside of regular classroom hours.
14. The professor announces a job opportunity to only a select few good advisees.
15. The professor answers out-of-classroom questions only during posted office hours, even though not all students can meet during those times.

### **Classroom Management Practices:**

16. The professor provides donuts for students attending the regularly scheduled 8:00 a.m. class session every Friday morning.
17. Whenever students carry on a conversation during class, the professor makes a point of calling on them to inquire as to what they are visiting about.
18. The professor provides refreshments to students on the day of the teaching evaluation.
19. The professor never makes class notes, transparencies, etc. available to students, even those who have an excused absence.

20. The professor requires students to work in teams when completing class projects. Student teams are required to regularly meet outside of normal class time to work on assignments. Because of these mandatory work sessions, students sometimes have to miss other classes or other scheduled events such as examinations which necessitates make-up tests in other courses.
21. When returning graded examinations and assignments, the professor routinely comments loudly about how well each student performed.

**Attendance/Participation Rules:**

22. The professor does not specifically give students points for class participation, but gives the benefit of the doubt to above-average participating students when deciding borderline final grades.
23. The professor does not require class attendance, so students are not penalized for skipping class no matter how many sessions they miss.
24. Adhering to announced course policy, the professor randomly (using shuffled note cards) calls on students each class session. The professor occasionally skips calling on selected students who are regularly prepared.
25. Adhering to announced course policy, the professor randomly (using shuffled note cards) calls on students each class session. The professor occasionally skips calling on selected students who don't appear to be prepared.
26. The professor teaches two sections of the same class, one during the day (three 50 minute sessions each week) and another at night (one 150 minute weekly session). The professor does not require attendance in the day section. However, night-time students are penalized for absences because the professor believes these students cannot afford to miss so much class time.
27. The professor regularly uses the Socratic Method in class to cover material assigned for the day. The professor repeatedly calls on the same "suspect" students to ensure that they are adequately preparing for class and skips those who the professor believes are good students.
28. The professor, who has a strict written attendance policy, only applies it to lower the grade of those students perceived as not working hard enough in the course.

**Assignment, Quiz, Exam Practices:**

29. The professor gives students the option of throwing out their low exam score.
30. The professor adopted a policy that exempts those students with A's in the class from taking the comprehensive final exam.
31. The professor allows all students the same amount of time to complete an examination, even those with unregistered but likely disabilities.
32. The professor has a written policy prohibiting make-up quizzes, but occasionally allows some absent students who have a good excuse to take them late.
33. The professor does not allow students who miss an exam to take a make-up test. Instead, the professor follows the policy of weighting the next test, or the final, more heavily.
34. The professor does not allow students to make up a quiz or turn in homework late, irrespective of the reason why the student failed to comply with the given task.
35. The professor teaches two sections of the same class. One sections meets three times a week during the day for 50 minutes each session, and includes traditional students. The other section is a night class that meets once a week for two and one-half hours each time, and consists mostly of nontraditional students. The professor uses identical examinations in both sections, giving students their respective regular class period to complete the test. The professor's rationale is that students in the night class need additional time to complete the test because they generally have less time to study.
36. The professor teaches two sections of the same class. One section meets three times a week during the day for 50 minutes each session, and includes mostly full-time traditional students. The other section is a night class that meets once a week for two and one-half hours each time, and consists mostly of nontraditional part-time students who work full-time. The professor requires the daytime students to turn in homework, but does not require the same of the evening students.

**Differential Treatment Issues:**

37. The professor allows international students having English as a second language more time to complete exams than what is allowed the other students.
38. The professor has a written attendance policy that penalizes students for excessive unexcused absences. Since the professor believes fraternity and sorority members are in general given preferential treatment, all absences relating to participation in University-sponsored Greek events are not excused.
39. The professor invites selected student leaders, some of whom are currently enrolled in the professor's class, to dinner at the professor's home as a way to keep abreast of general student concerns.
40. The professor has no stated policy regarding extra credit work. The professor does, however, give a failing student (of the opposite sex) who needs the class to graduate the opportunity to earn additional points by doing extra assignments.
41. The professor allows student athletes additional time to complete examinations since they frequently have more absences than other students.
42. The professor has a written policy prohibiting extra credit work. Unbeknownst to the entire class, however, the professor gives student athletes and band members who miss class due to their participation in athletic events the opportunity to earn extra points.

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NOTES