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Debra S. Emmelman

Michael DeCesare

Merrimack College, decesarem@merrimack.edu

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COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR 'BEST' AND 'WORST' COURSES AND INSTRUCTORS*

Debra S. Emmelman

Southern Connecticut State University

and

Michael DeCesare

Merrimack College

This paper presents results from a content analysis of college students' descriptions of their "best" and "worst" courses and instructors. We were interested primarily in two issues: how college students evaluate their courses, and the extent to which they emphasize various dimensions in their evaluations. We found that students evaluated their course experiences along seven interrelated dimensions: factors external to the course, level of tedium, classroom activities, classroom atmosphere, instructor's comportment, workload/assignments/grading issues, and acquisition of knowledge and skills. These dimensions were emphasized to different degrees and tended to vary in oppositional manners according to the type of course. Our results can assist college faculty who seek to become better teachers, and reassure those who have been disappointed in their endeavors that receiving poor evaluations does not always or necessarily reflect poor teaching methods.

The evaluation of professors by their students has become a standard practice on U.S. college and university campuses. Trout (1997) claimed 10 years ago that they were used at about 80 percent of institutions nationwide; the percentage has almost certainly grown since then. The ostensible purposes of students' evaluations are to determine whether professors are effective teachers, how their teaching might be improved, and the extent to which they should be rewarded for their teaching skills with tenure, promotion, and merit pay. Because they are cheap and easy to

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administer, they have replaced classroom observations and syllabi evaluations on most campuses (Williams and Ceci 1997). While such assessment instruments are widely used and frequently wield considerable might in institutional decision-making, there is little consensus among researchers as to the important dimensions of effective college teaching, the extent to which students' evaluations of teaching are actually valid, and precisely how students' course evaluations should be used to gauge effective teaching. Indeed, the very validity of students' evaluations continues to be debated (Greenwald 1997).

This paper contributes in three ways to a deeper understanding of student evaluations of college courses and instructors. First, it provides a general description of desirable and undesirable college courses and instructors *from the students' points of view*. It also offers a rather comprehensive list of the dimensions that students mentioned as indicative of good and bad learning experiences. Finally, by categorizing and tabulating students' responses, we provide an account of the relative *emphases* that students placed on various dimensions of teaching. Our results can assist professors who seek to improve their teaching, and reassure those who have been disappointed in their endeavors that receiving poor evaluations does not always or necessarily reflect low teaching ability or poor teaching methods.

Method

This study was inspired by the first author's deepening frustration with receiving disappointingly low student course evaluations despite extensive efforts to improve her teaching.¹ Our purpose was to design a study that would gather practical and detailed information directly from students about their perceptions of their "best" and "worst" courses and instructors. We decided a qualitative study would elicit the most useful data for our purposes.

The scholarly literature on college course evaluations is truly vast. To make matters more difficult, it is characterized not only by contradictory results, but by methodological rigidity. Likert-type rating scales have typically been used as the sole or major means of response available to students (see, for examples, Basow and Distenfeld 1985; Basow and Howe 1987; Basow and Silberg 1987; Burns-Glover and Veith 1995; Dukes and Victoria 1989; Ferber and Huber 1975; Freeman 1994; Jirovec, Ramanathan and Alvarez 1998; Williams and Ceci 1997). As Dukes and Victoria (1989) point out, such instruments have often been used for the sole purpose of standardizing students' responses. But they also have the effect, we believe, of overstating or suppressing some of the different—and potentially important—aspects of students' own assessments of their courses and instructors. By including four open-ended items (as discussed

in more detail below) and encouraging students to respond freely, elaborately, and anonymously, we believe that we have illuminated some factors and issues affecting student evaluations that, because of the constraints imposed by closed-ended items, previous researchers have not been able to ascertain.

To our knowledge, there have been very few qualitative studies of students' evaluations of courses or instructors. Among them, Bridges, Ware, Brown, and Greenwood (1971) attempted to uncover the general characteristics of "best" and "worst" college teachers by asking students, faculty members, and administrators to provide the six outstanding characteristics of both. Likewise, we asked students to describe the factors involved in their evaluations. Unlike Bridges *et al.* (1971), however, we placed no limitations on the students' descriptions and instead relied upon their recollections of outstanding characteristics. In this manner, only those characteristics that were *most* exceptional to students emerged in their descriptions; they were not compelled to list any more or fewer characteristics. Thus, we believe we have captured a more "natural" view of the situation.

During the first week of classes in January 1999, we and three colleagues administered a questionnaire to 234 students enrolled in eight sections of three lower-level sociology courses at an urban northeastern university. Since we carried out the survey during the first week of the semester, nearly all of the students who were officially enrolled in these course sections received a questionnaire to complete. The eight sections comprised one-third of all course sections offered that semester; we selected them on the basis of convenience. While our sample certainly cannot be considered representative of all university students or even all students enrolled at this specific university, we do believe it is large and diverse enough to provide a good idea of what students generally expect in the college classroom.

The questionnaire was composed of 39 items. For our purposes, the four most significant items were the following open-ended statements:²

- 1a) Think about the *best* college course you have had. (If this is your first semester in college, think about the best high school course you had.) Describe, in as much detail as possible, *WHY* you liked the course.
- 1b) If you have not already done so, please describe in as much detail as possible *WHAT YOU LIKED ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR*.
- 2a) Think about the *worst* college course you have had. (If this is your first semester in college, think about the worst high school course you had.) Describe, in as much detail as possible, *WHY* you disliked the course.
- 2b) If you have not already done so, please describe in as much detail as possible *WHAT YOU DISLIKED ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR*.

Students' completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. Although all 234 students who were in attendance participated, not all of them responded to all four of the open-ended statements. A total of 212 students provided descriptions of their best college course/instructor, while 202 provided descriptions of their worst college course/instructor. We conducted a content analysis on the responses to the four open-ended items above. Through this technique, we were able to determine the extent of students' emphases in their appraisals of both their best and worst courses and their best and worst instructors.

The Dimensions of Students' "Best" and "Worst" Courses

Students evaluated their best and worst courses and instructors along seven interrelated dimensions. These dimensions, and some of the particularly relevant sub-themes contained within them, are presented in Table 1. It is important to note that although the best and worst courses were evaluated along the same dimensions, the character of the evaluations tended to vary in oppositional manners (cf., Bridges et al. 1971). For example, nearly one-third of students assessed *both* their best (32%) *and* worst (31%) courses on the basis of classroom teaching activities. But while the best courses were characterized by a clear and organized presentation of the material, the worst courses were seen as disorganized and confusing.

Also presented in Table 1 are the percentage distributions of students' descriptors for each of the seven dimensions as well as for the sub-themes within them. Consistent with much past research (e.g., Feldman 1976, 1987; Black and Rice 1996; Chermesh 1977; Jirovec, Ramanathan, and Alvarez 1998; Petchers and Chow 1988; Suitor and Feld 1984), we found that the dimensions most frequently emphasized by students were classroom teaching activities and instructor's comportment. Together, these dimensions comprised 63 percent of all descriptors regarding the best courses and instructors, and 58 percent of all descriptors regarding the worst courses and instructors.

Separately, factors external to the course, level of tedium, classroom atmosphere, workload/outside assignments/grading issues and acquisition of knowledge each comprise relatively small percentages of all descriptors; together, however, they constitute nearly 38 percent of all descriptors for the best courses and 43 percent of all descriptors for the worst courses. Moreover, as we discuss in more detail below, it is unclear whether certain responses within these particular dimensions can be seen as legitimate praise or condemnation of teaching techniques. In fact, they may not refer to quality of teaching at all (see Delucchi 2000).

We can also see from Table 1 that the extent to which certain dimensions were emphasized in the best and worst courses varied

Table 1
Dimensions of Students’ Evaluations and Their Relative Emphases in the
“Best” and “Worst” Courses

<i>Best Course/Instructor</i>		<i>Worst Course/Instructor</i>	
<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>
Factors External to the Course	6 (52)	Factors External to the Course	9 (55)
Prior interest in course topic	3 (27)	Prior disinterest in course topic	3 (17)
Easy-to-understand topic for student prior to enrollment	3 (21)	Difficult topic for student prior to enrollment	3 (20)
Liked course scheduling	.2 (2)	Disliked course scheduling	1 (7)
Size of class (too small)	.2 (2)	Size of class (too large)	2 (11)
Tedium: Interesting/Not Boring	8 (68)	Tedium: Uninteresting/ Boring	9 (54)
Classroom Teaching Activities	32 (273)	Classroom Teaching Activities	31 (182)
Clarification of material	9 (75)	Confusion/disorganization	18 (107)
Other teaching activities	23 (198)	Other teaching activities	13 (75)
Classroom Atmosphere	6 (51)	Classroom Atmosphere	4 (24)
Instructor’s Comportment (not noted or implied elsewhere)	31 (264)	Instructor’s Comportment (not noted or implied elsewhere)	27 (157)
Responsiveness to students’ needs and ideas regarding the learning situation	20 (172)	Lack of responsiveness to students’ needs and ideas regarding the learning situation	20 (118)
Other appealing characteristics	11 (92)	Other unappealing characteristics	7 (39)
Workload, Outside Assignments, and Grading Issues	11 (90)	Workload, Outside Assignments, and Grading Issues	18 (105)
Acquisition of Knowledge/Skills	7 (62)	Acquisition of Knowledge/Skills	3 (17)
Total	99 (860)	Total	101 (594)

Note: Some column totals in this and other tables do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

somewhat: students more frequently complained about factors external to the course, confusing teaching techniques, and workload, assignments and grading issues in their worst courses; they more frequently touted the non-teaching-related characteristics of the instructors, the classroom atmosphere, the different types of classroom activities, and the extent to which they learned in their best courses (cf., Bridges *et al.* 1971). More detailed information regarding these different emphases is presented in the discussion and tables below.³

Classroom Activities, Level of Tedium, and Classroom Atmosphere

From the second table, we can see that the majority of students who commented on the problem of clarity in their worst courses complained that instructors did not provide examples, adequately explain and/or

simplify material. Difficulty in communicating material is also implied in the comments that some instructors were too intelligent or intellectual, and that others simply could not articulate clearly due to some type of speaking complication (cf., Feldman 1988). Similarly, students stated that too much note-taking, too many tangents, the instructor's lack of preparedness, inconsistent expectations among multiple instructors, as well as other types of disorganization in the presentation of materials detracted from their educational experience.⁴

Table 2
Classroom Teaching Activities

<i>Best Course/Instructor</i>		<i>Worst Course/Instructor</i>	
<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>
Clarification of Material	27 (75)	Confusion/Disorganization	58 (107)
Explained/simplified/provided Examples	19 (53)	Did not explain/simplify/provide examples	16 (30)
Repetition of material	1 (2)	Too intelligent/intellectual	2 (4)
Clear/audible speaker	1 (3)	Oral communication problems; (e.g., foreign, speech impediment)	6 (11)
Organized/focused	4 (12)	Tangents/disorganized/unprepared	14 (26)
		Too many instructors/unclear expectations	3 (6)
		Too much note-taking	1 (1)
Use of board/visual aids	2 (5)	Lack of visual aids/writing on board	2 (3)
		Vague/no reason provided	14 (26)
Other Teaching Activities	73 (198)	Other Teaching Activities	41 (75)
Many or entirely lectures	4 (1)	Lectured from book	5 (9)
Did not lecture from text	4 (1)	Many or entirely lectures	13 (24)
No or few lectures	5 (14)		
Variety	6 (15)	Lack of variety	1 (2)
"Fun"/interesting activities	10 (28)	"Tedious" projects and activities	3 (6)
Discussion/student involvement	18 (48)	No or little discussion/student involvement	13 (24)
Hands-on activities	6 (17)		
Small group work/socializing/interacting with other students	7 (19)		
Application to students' lives and/or careers	17 (46)	Inapplicable to students' lives and/or careers	5 (9)
Vague/no reason provided	3 (9)	Professor late/canceled classes	1 (1)
Total	100 (273)	Total	99 (182)

These results clearly indicate that, as others have found (e.g., Feldman 1976, 1988; Jirovec, Ramanathan and Alvarez 1998; Lackey 1980; Patrick and Smart 1998; Suitor and Feld 1984), clarity and organization are important dimensions of teaching evaluations (emphasized in 27% of the descriptions of the best courses and in 58% of the descriptions of the worst courses).

Although not presented in Table 2, it is important to point out here that only two students complained about an instructor's lack of availability during office hours. (These comments were categorized as "unaccommodating" under *Instructor's Comportment*.) Consequently, we conclude that most of the complaints regarding an instructor's confusing behavior refer to conduct that students *expected to take place in the classroom*. Thus, at least some of the students' confusion associated with a "poor" instructor's failure to explain, simplify or provide examples may exist because the instructor expects students to study some course material *outside* of the classroom and/or does not review all important material *in class*. If this is correct, we would expect a substantial number of complaints regarding workload, test preparation and other grading issues. As suggested above and discussed below, the "worst" courses and instructors are indeed characterized in this manner.

The vast majority of the students who commented about other types of *classroom activities* made it clear that they dislike lectures: 13 percent of all complaints about teaching activities referred to too many lectures and 5 percent of the praise noted that there were few or no lectures. Additionally, no student complained about too few lectures and only one found an instructor's lectures to be highly informative and interesting. Finally, while only two students explicitly complained about a lack of variety in their worst courses, over seven times more students explained their preference for a course by referring explicitly to its variety in classroom activities.

Because "learning style" implies a single method by which a person learns best, and because many people learn best by listening, it is difficult to explain the distaste for lectures or the preference for variety by referring simply to learning styles. Instead, because the single most common type of descriptor which emerged throughout the content analysis referred to a course's *level of tedium* (i.e., it was either "boring" or "interesting"), and because the concept is consistent with all the other descriptors in this category, it seems safe to conclude that the distaste for lectures and the preference for variety are better accounted for by the course's and/or the instructor's "interestingness" (cf., Feldman 1976, 1988).

A third important parameter along which students explained their preference and distaste for certain courses concerned the *tenor or atmosphere of the classroom*. Specific aspects of this dimension are presented

in Table 3. An overwhelming majority (84%) of students who commented on the classroom atmosphere of their best courses preferred fun, relaxing, enjoyable, lax environments. A substantial percentage (42%) of students who commented on their worst courses similarly indicated that they do not like a stressful environment, to be “put on the spot,” or to adhere to rigid rules on classroom conduct.

Table 3
Classroom Atmosphere

Best Course/Instructor		Worst Course/Instructor	
Dimensions	% (N)	Dimensions	% (N)
Demanding/strict	12 (6)	Not challenging/demanding/strict enough	4 (1)
“Fun”/enjoyable	43 (22)		
Relaxed/comfortable/unstressful	31 (16)	Too stressful/demanding/strict	42 (10)
Lax/lenient	10 (5)		
Small/intimate, friendly setting	4 (2)	Too large/lack of individual attention/anonymity	54 (13)
Total	100 (51)	Total	100 (24)

Instructor’s Comportment

The fourth, and without a doubt, the most important dimension to emerge from students’ responses had to do with the comportment of the instructor. More specifically, the most frequently mentioned characteristic of the “best” instructors is their “openness” to students’ complaints, concerns, questions, and other input (cf., Chermesh 1977; Crittenden and Norr 1973; Jirovec, Ramanathan and Alvarez 1998; Feldman 1976, 1988). Students like to feel that an instructor is *responsive* to them. The “worst” instructors are characterized in the opposite manner—as unresponsive and unapproachable. While some of these characteristics appear to overlap with the classroom atmosphere, it was clear in the analysis that students desired responsiveness, openness, and approachability of their instructors both inside *as well as outside of* the classroom⁵: Students preferred instructors who were willing not only to respond to questions in the classroom but also to be “understanding” about problems regarding their assignments, grades, tardiness, and absences.

The instructor’s responsiveness to students’ needs and ideas with regard to the learning situation also refers to the manner in which s/he conducts classroom dialogue. Specifically, many of the “worst” instructors presented *some* type of information which the student did not like or disagreed with, and/or presented information in a manner that the student did not feel free to respond to or encouraged to debate.⁶

Conversely, with just a few exceptions, the "best" instructors are those who conduct classroom discussions in a manner by which everyone feels free to express their opinions and no one is "wrong"—or perhaps no *more* wrong than anyone else.⁷

On the other hand, some students expressed dislike of an instructor who was *too* "laid back" or "easy" (6% of all descriptors in this dimension), or expressed no opinion (1% of all descriptors in this dimension). Similarly, other students stated that they preferred an instructor because s/he was challenging or strict, contentious, or blunt (5%, 3% and 2% of all descriptors respectively). While these accounts may indeed be exceptions to the general rule, it is also important to realize that they could still be consistent with students' desires to express their opinions in the classroom and/or not be incorrect in their responses; it may be that some instructors may be liked not simply because they are "blunt" or "contentious" but because the students agree with or like the instructor's perspective.

While the majority of reasons for preferring or disliking certain instructors can be seen as directly related to their role as a teacher, more than one quarter of the responses in this category do not appear directly related: 28 percent of all reasons for preferring certain instructors refer to outgoing, affable personalities (i.e., "nice," "enthusiastic," "funny") and 20 percent of all reasons for disliking certain instructors refer to less exuberant and more aloof as well as perhaps abrupt personalities (cf., Delucchi 2000). In addition, age and other factors play some role in this assessment (cf., Dukes and Victoria 1989; Feldman 1976, 1983; Woodman 1980). While such characteristics *may* play a role in effective teaching, we believe it is crucial to point out that they also may *not*. In any case, it is worthwhile to consider whether college professors should be held accountable for students' preferences in these instances or whether students should instead be encouraged to learn greater tolerance and respect for diverse teacher personalities and social characteristics.

Workload, Assignments, Grading, and the Acquisition of Knowledge

Past findings regarding the effects of workload, assignments, and grading, and of the acquisition of knowledge, on students' evaluations of courses and instructors generally suggest that these factors are important. Bridges *et al.* (1971), Jirovec, Ramanathan, and Alvarez (1998) and Petchers and Chow (1988) all found that students place significant emphasis on the evaluation process and grading in their rating of instructors. Similarly, Feldman (1988) found that students emphasize the outcomes of instruction more than faculty do. Suitor and Feld (1984) concluded that students' perceptions that their knowledge had increased were more strongly related to taking additional sociology courses than were other aspects of student evaluations. They also found, however, that high

Table 4
Instructor's Comportment

Best Course/Instructor		Worst Course/Instructor	
Dimensions	% (N)	Dimensions	% (N)
Responsiveness to Students' Needs and Ideas Regarding the Learning Situation	67 (172)	Unresponsiveness to Students' Needs and Ideas Regarding the Learning Situation	76 (118)
Approachable/"open" to students' input, complaints and/or concerns; accommodating; supportive	30 (79)	Unapproachable/unresponsive to students' input, complaints and/or concerns; unaccommodating	26 (41)
Lenient/laid back/patient	11 (28)	Too challenging/strict	6 (9)
Did not dominate/students freely expressed opinions	1 (2)	Arrogant/belittling/"cocky"	15 (24)
No favoritism/nonjudgmental	1 (3)	Prejudiced/sexist/judgmental/showed favoritism	8 (13)
Agreement with professor's opinions	1 (2)	Disagreed with professor's perspective/professor not receptive to others' perspectives	5 (7)
Honest/blunt	2 (6)	Professor expressed no opinion	1 (1)
Controversial/contentious	3 (7)		
Challenging/strict	5 (12)	Too lenient/laid back/easy	6 (9)
Knowledgeable	11 (28)	Unknowledgeable/ignorant/unprepared	2 (3)
Other/vague (e.g., "good teacher")	2 (5)	Other/vague (e.g., ineffective/not helpful)	7 (11)
Other Appealing Characteristics	35 (92)	Other Unappealing Characteristics	26 (39)
Nice/personable/friendly	11 (30)	Uncordial/remote	11 (17)
Enthusiasm/vibrancy/energy	8 (22)	Bland/monotonous/"tired"	9 (14)
Funny	9 (23)		
Young	2 (4)	Old	3 (4)
Foreign	1 (2)		
Other (e.g., attractive, cool, strong, wonderful, strange/unique)	4 (11)	Other (e.g., jerk, sucked, witch, too concerned with being "cool")	3 (4)
Total	102 (264)	Total	102 (157)

grades were not an important variable.⁸ And finally, Lackey (1980) found that fairness in grading and assignments were salient in students' evaluations of mathematics courses but not in sociology courses.

As evident from Table 1 and from Table 5 below, our results support most previous conclusions. Workload, assignments, grading, and the acquisition of knowledge or skills were mentioned in 18 percent of all

Table 5
Workload, Assignments, and Grading

<i>Best Course/Instructor</i>		<i>Worst Course/Instructor</i>	
<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>% (N)</i>
Level/Ease of Workload	34 (30)	Level/Ease of Workload	25 (26)
No/"light" workload/ assignments	3 (3)	Workload too light	1 (1)
Easy workload/assignments/exams	7 (6)		
Understandable readings	1 (1)	Readings too difficult/unclear/ tedious	6 (6)
"Fair" workload/assignments	6 (5)		
Interesting readings	1 (1)		
Exams/assignments required critical thinking, creativity, independent study/research	10 (9)		
"Heavy/challenging" workload/ assignments	6 (5)	Workload too "heavy/ challenging"	18 (19)
Character of Testing Instruments	10 (9)	Character of Testing Instruments	13 (13)
Frequent exams/assignments	1 (1)	Too few exams/assignments	6 (6)
Variety of assignments/tests	3 (3)	No variety in testing procedures	3 (3)
Student's preferred type of assignments/tests	6 (5)	Too many exams/assignments	4 (4)
Exam Guidance	21 (19)	Exam Guidance	22 (22)
Exams and assignments clear	8 (7)	Exams & assignments unclear	9 (9)
Exams covered only material covered in class/lecture	4 (4)	Exams covered material not covered in class	6 (6)
Exams covered only material covered in course	2 (2)	Some work not graded/tested over	2 (2)
Handouts/test preparation provided	7 (6)	No test preparation provided	5 (5)
Grading	34 (32)	Grading	42 (44)
		Grading too easy	3 (3)
Extra credit	1 (1)	No extra credit	1 (1)
Opportunity to improve grade	2 (2)	No opportunity to improve grade	1 (1)
Grading on improvement	4 (4)		
Only passing grades acceptable	3 (3)		
Exams/ assignments improved skills/constructive criticism	7 (6)		
"Fair" grading	13 (12)	"Unfair" grading	17 (18)
		Grading too harsh	11 (12)
Received a good grade	4 (4)	Failed/received a poor grade	9 (9)
Total	99 (90)	Total	102 (105)

descriptors of best courses and in 21 percent of all descriptors for worst courses. Only thirteen comments (less than 1% of all descriptors) were made explicitly regarding the receipt of a good or bad grade. Yet it is important to realize here that, in some sense, *all* of the students' comments in these last two dimensions can be seen as somehow associated with receiving an acceptable grade of some sort. In other words, student complaints and praise regarding workload, the character of testing instruments, exam guidance, grading issues, and even the acquisition of knowledge can all be seen to reflect concern about the student's assessed performance in the course.

Equally as relevant and interesting are the different manners in which these factors were emphasized in the "best" as opposed to in the "worst" courses. As stated earlier, students emphasized workload, outside assignments, and grading issues seven percent more in characterizations of their worst courses than their best courses (18% of all descriptors regarding the worst course and 11% of all descriptors regarding the best course). To a large extent, their reasons for disliking particular courses due to these factors are what one would expect: 24 percent of all reasons in this category refer to a difficult or heavy workload and only one student complained that the workload was too light.⁹ Similarly, 13 percent of complaints in this category refer to an instructor's inflexibility regarding testing instruments and procedures (e.g., "only papers assigned" and "too few exams"), and 22 percent refer to inadequate exam guidance or preparation. Finally, 28 percent of all complaints in this category allege that the instructor graded too harshly or unfairly.

In contrast, only 6 percent of all reasons in this category with reference to best courses refer to a challenging workload, while 17 percent refer to a "reasonable" or "easy" workload. Ten percent refer to an appreciation of the instructor's testing instrument(s), and 21 percent praise the instructor for his or her exam guidance and preparation. Finally, while only 4 percent refer to the receipt of a good grade as a reason for preferring a course, fully 10 percent refer to opportunities for improving one's grades and the fact that an instructor would not accept anything *but* a passing grade.

Overall, it seems that complaints regarding workload, assignments, and grading reflect the general consensus that the "worst" instructors are too "tough" and "demanding." On the other hand, the "best" instructors tend to make good grades more easily accessible to students. This is consistent with Feldman's (1988) conclusion that students place more importance than faculty on being available and helpful (cf., Bridges et al. 1971), and on the outcomes of instruction, while faculty place more importance on teachers being intellectually challenging, motivating and setting high standards for students, and encouraging self-initiated

learning (cf., Bridges et al. 1971). What is not entirely clear, however, is whether or the extent to which these inconsistent expectations are reflected in students' evaluations of specific courses and instructors or whether any of these expectations are unreasonable.

Table 6
Acquisition of Knowledge/Skills

Best Course/Instructor		Worst Course/Instructor	
Dimensions	% (N)	Dimensions	% (N)
Learned/Improved Skills a Great Deal	58 (36)	Learned little or nothing	100 (17)
Learned Something/Improved Skills	42 (26)		
Total	100 (62)	Total	100 (17)

It is perhaps ironic that of all the different reasons that students provided for disliking a course or instructor, the least frequently mentioned was the acquisition of knowledge (see Table 1). This might be because this rationale requires less detail to express or is somewhat implicit in some of the other reasons provided. Nevertheless, only three percent of all those who explained their distaste for a course mentioned this factor. Additionally, only seven percent of students who explained their preference for a course mentioned it. While certainly these percentages are not insignificant, they are nonetheless substantially less than what most instructors hope for. After all, the acquisition of knowledge is the ultimate goal of education and should be the standard against which all efforts are measured.

Summary and Conclusion

This study grew out of the first author's personal experience, and was conducted in an effort to understand how college students evaluate their courses and instructors. We found that factors external to the course, such as prior interest in the subject matter, scheduling, and course size, have some influence on students' appraisals; they were emphasized six percent of the time in evaluations of best courses and instructors and nine percent of the time for worst courses and instructors. However, other variables appear to have an equal or substantially greater influence overall. In particular, level of tedium and classroom atmosphere were mentioned between four and nine percent of the time. Workload, outside assignments, and grading issues were listed 11 percent of the time for best courses and 18 percent of the time for the worst courses. And while students referred to the acquisition of knowledge as a reason for

preferring a course seven percent of the time, the same dimension was mentioned the least often (only 3% of the time) for the worst courses. Classroom teaching activities and the instructor's comportment were by far the most frequently emphasized factors, ranging between 27 and 32 percent of the responses.

Overall, the students in our sample preferred courses in which the material was presented in a clear and organized manner. They also preferred professors who explained and simplified material in class as well as presented the material in an interesting and enjoyable manner. Many of the "best" professors employed a variety of classroom activities in addition to maintaining a relaxed, fun environment in which all students had ample opportunity to discuss issues and no student was apt to have his/her input disavowed. It was also helpful if the instructor was friendly, funny, or possessed some other agreeable attributes.

Students also tended to prefer instructors who were responsive to their concerns and complaints, who were open to a variety of methods for evaluating their performances, who prepared them for exams, and who provided them with ample opportunity to improve their grades. A substantial number did not like challenging or difficult workloads¹⁰, did not like completing assignments over which they were not tested, and preferred instructors who covered exam material in the classroom.¹¹ And while only four students claimed that they liked a course because they received a good grade, fully 20 percent of those who described their worst courses complained about the instructor's grading.¹² Unfortunately, the vast majority of students (93%) did not place great emphasis on the extent to which they learned in their best course; an even larger percentage (97%) did not emphasize this issue in their worst course.

We are forced to some paradoxical conclusions regarding the usefulness of college students' evaluations of teaching. Specifically, while evaluations may indeed elicit some legitimate complaints and compliments regarding teaching effectiveness, and may provide some valuable suggestions for the improvement of teaching, they also appear to encompass far too many ambiguities to place a great deal of credence in them. It is certainly appropriate for students to expect their instructors to present information in a clear and organized manner, for example. Yet it also seems entirely appropriate for instructors to expect students to exercise some responsibility and self-motivation for reviewing material not explicitly covered in the classroom.

Similarly, it is reasonable for students to expect at least some open discussion and a diversity of opinions. At the same time, it is not reasonable for them to expect course material to simply reaffirm their own viewpoints. We recognize and support students' right to expect competent, fair, and equitable treatment from their professors. Our results

suggest, however, that college administrators and educational assessors should not assume that students always or necessarily possess the proper motives or sufficient knowledge to make competent, fair, and equitable judgments about these matters.

Notes

1. Anthony Greenwald's (1997) important work was also inspired by his personal experiences with student's evaluations of his teaching.
2. We include responses to other questionnaire items only as they become relevant. Copies of the questionnaire, and the statistical results from other questions, can be obtained from the first author.
3. In the next five tables, dimensions and certain sub-themes within each dimension have been grouped together across rows. This was done to present the various aspects and/or the range of a dimension and also to convey the oppositional character which exists between evaluations of best and worst courses. Also shown in these tables are the raw frequencies and percentages of all descriptors within a dimension.
4. Unfortunately, 14 percent of students who complained about the problem of clarity did not provide any details by which to pinpoint its specific character. However, because a roughly equivalent percentage of reasons for preferring a course emphasized that the instructor explained, simplified and/or provided examples of course material, we might conclude that most of these complaints refer to the lack of this behavior.
5. Many of the characterizations presented in Table 4 appear to overlap with those in Table 3. These descriptions were regarded as distinct in the analysis, however, because they referred to the actual instructor instead of the tenor of the classroom. Additionally, we would note that the meaning of some terms used in different categories presented below and elsewhere are ambiguous. For example, one student claimed that a professor was too "easy." Such comments were categorized on the basis of context; for example, the statement that an instructor was "easy" was categorized as "laid-back/lenient" because the context of the statement indicated that the student was referring to the instructor's comportment in the classroom rather than to grading or workload issues. Nevertheless, because we were unable to do in-depth interviews to clarify ambiguities, it is important to note that what some of these terms actually mean is not altogether clear and that some terms may not actually be distinct in intended meaning.
6. Obviously, adjectives such as "prejudiced," "sexist," and "judgmental" refer to undesirable attitudes and behaviors which may not be directly related to the learning experience. However, because we cannot determine the accuracy with which such terms were applied to instructors or whether they were applied in reaction to course material (no student provided a specific example or illustration of why s/he viewed an instructor in such a manner), we can only conclude that such portrayals emerged in reaction to the way in which an instructor comported him or herself sometime during the student's course experience. For this reason, these portrayals were not categorized as "other" types of characteristics.

7. This conclusion is also consistent with students preferences for instructors who are not only "open" and "supportive," but who do not appear to have favorites, be "judgmental," or dominate classroom discussion.
8. There has been much discussion of the complexity of the relationship between grades and evaluations (cf., Greenwald and Gillmore 1997; Marsh 2001).
9. For a discussion of the important distinction between "good" and "bad" workloads, see Marsh 2001.
10. In response to item #29 on the survey, 77 percent of students noted that they expected to spend four hours or less per week studying for a course. Only six percent expected to spend six or more hours per week studying for a course. In response to item #30 on the survey, 39 percent of students thought it was reasonable to expect them to read twenty pages or less per week. Of these, 12 percent thought fewer than 11 pages were reasonable.
11. In response to item #16 on the survey, 60 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that "Exams should cover only material reviewed in lectures."
12. It should also be noted here that in response to item #33 on the survey, no less than 80 percent of the students enrolled in the surveyed courses stated that they expected to receive a "B" or better in those courses. These responses occurred despite the facts that the survey was administered during the first week of class and that students were provided with the option of responding with "don't know/uncertain."

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