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Student Entitlement: Key Questions and Short Answers

WHAT IS STUDENT entitlement?

Ask a group of teachers to define student entitlement and their answers will strike similar themes. A definition often used by researchers categorizes student entitlement as a “tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success.”

How widespread is it? Very, if you talk with faculty. They’ve seen it, experienced it, can tell stories about it, and know colleagues who’ve had to deal with it. The research (and there’s not a lot) reports finding less student entitlement than faculty do. In one study, 370 business students had a “low sense” of entitlement on a research-developed instrument (a 2.82 mean on a 7-point scale, Elias, 2017). In another, a 2.63 mean on the slightly disagree side of a 6-point scale represented the views of a 466, cross-disciplinary student cohort (Greenberger, et. al., 2008).

What does it look like? Despite agreement on the definition, there’s not much consensus on the beliefs and behaviors that illustrate entitlement. Those commonly proposed include the belief that effort should count (“If I’m trying, the professor should consider that”), that grades should be adjusted in favor of the student (“If my grade is close to the cutoff, the professor ought to bump it up”), that professors are responsible for student learning (“If the prof can’t explain it clearly, I shouldn’t have to learn it”), that professors owe students certain things (“If I need help, the professor should come to me”), that students have the right to behave as they see fit (“The professor shouldn’t care if I come late or leave early”), and that exams and courses are better if they’re not terribly taxing (“I like courses where I don’t have work too hard”).

Can a student be entitled without being rude and disruptive? Yes. Students can

have beliefs like those mentioned above and only discuss them with other students or not discuss them at all. Part of what makes entitlement challenging for teachers are those students who do verbally express the attitudes, often aggressively. What the research hasn’t yet sorted out is the percentage of students who do and don’t express these attitudes to their teachers and whether those unexpressed attitudes affect learning outcomes.

Are millennial students more entitled than previous generations? That’s another widely held assumption in the academic community, but support from research is indirect and inconsistent. Research does show an association between narcissism and entitlement but there’s disagreement as to whether college students today are more narcissistic than they were previously. There is evidence that millennials do believe more strongly in their capabilities at the same time they report weaker work ethics. And the research is uncovering some interesting blips. The entitlement attitude found in some studies isn’t related to one’s age or year in school.

Is entitlement something that only happens in the academic environment? No, it has been studied, written about, and observed in other contexts (like work environments), but some of its features are unique to the academic environment—such as, the idea that grades are deserved, not necessarily earned.

What’s causing it? There’s a plethora of reasons that have been proposed. Some research has tied entitlement to personality characteristics; other researchers have looked at parenting and parental expectations. A number think it’s the result of previous educational experiences and/or grade inflation. Some blame technology that gives

students greater access to teachers and the expectation of immediate responses. Fairly regularly, student evaluations are blamed for the anonymous power and control they give students. And finally, there’s the rise in consumerism that’s now associated with education. Students (and their parents) pay (usually a lot) for college and the sense that those tuition dollars entitle them to certain things, is generally not what teachers think education entitles learners to receive. At this point it’s probably safe to say that entitlement is not being caused by one thing but by a collection of them, and the causes vary depending on the student.

How should teachers respond? This is probably the most important question and the one not being addressed in the research or talked about much by teachers. Perhaps that’s because the entitlement discussion isn’t an easy one to have with students. If

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How Should We Respond to Student Entitlement?

I DISCOVERED SOME good literature on the student entitlement topic while preparing for the Magna Online Seminar program I'm presenting later today. Among the content areas addressed in the literature are: what entitlement is, what attitudes and beliefs are indicative of it, what's causing it, whether it's a recent phenomenon, how it can be measured, and what those measurements reveal. But something crucial is missing: how should faculty respond. Some sources offer hints, but I did not find any good, substantive advice. This post then is an attempt to start the conversation and to invite your insights and suggestions for dealing with these troublesome attitudes and beliefs.

Maybe the advice is missing because confronting entitled perspectives is challenging. If a student wants to take the exam at a later date so he can attend Grandma's 90th birthday celebration, or if the objection to phone usage during class is answered with, "I paid for this course—what I do in it is my business"—the faculty member can say no or can cause the student to incur some consequences. Although those actions may take care of the immediate issue, they probably won't change the student's attitude. Rather, the student is more likely to conclude that the faculty member is difficult, or more jocularly, a jerk.

What teachers want most to avoid is the rude, aggressive display of entitled attitudes—in class, online, or in face-to-face conversations. Those expressions often feel like direct challenges to teacher authority and are difficult to answer without defensiveness and power moves. That prescribes a response that comes before the fact. Teachers should clarify their expectations at the beginning of the course and in the syllabus, and provide reminders as needed. "Grades are not curved in this class." "Students with borderline grades are not bumped up." "Exams are taken the days they are scheduled." "Late homework gets feedback but no credit." The preventative approach is most effective when teachers consistently adhere to stated expectations. On occasion there may be the need for an exception, but that happens rarely and is a matter that should be discussed privately with the student.

A second preventative approach involves having a conversation about entitlement before it's expressed. Do students know what it is? Are the attitudes ones they hold? It is at this point that the conversation can become challenging. In response to Greenberger, et. al.'s survey, 66.2% of the students endorsed this statement: "If I have explained to my professor that I'm trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my grade." If a majority or even a significant number of students in the class support an entitled attitude, the professor may be the only one verbalizing the position against it. When standing alone, it's tempting to assert the authority that comes with the position and end the conversation with a declarative statement. "No! Grades measure what you know and are able to do. End of story."

There needs to be a discussion on why attitudes of entitlement are harmful, starting with how they hurt the individual who holds them. If students get more points than they've earned, now those students have grades that indicate a level of knowledge not possessed. Moreover, giving students grades they haven't earned compromises teachers' integrity. They aren't being honest or fair. When students get accommodations they don't deserve, that tarnishes the reputation of their degree program and devalues what education aims to provide. And finally there are the potential professional costs that come when students leave college believing they are entitled.

And there's something else this conversation could profitably include. What would we say if a student asked us what a college education does entitle them to? The opportunity to learn? But is that all? The opportunity to learn in a safe environment, one that respects a diversity of views and perspectives? The chance to learn from experts, who know the content and understand how to teach it? This is the part of the discussion of entitlement that teachers should be having with each other.

Is persuading students a reasonable goal for conversations about entitlement? Probably not for one conversation, but if the message

is consistently delivered by multiple teachers and across the institution, then we'll start seeing progress.

Reference:

Greenberger, E., Lessard, J., Chen, C., and Farruggia, S. P. (2008). Self-entitled college students: Contributions of personality, parenting and motivational factor. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 37, 1193-1204.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *How Should We Respond to Student Entitlement?*; *Faculty Focus*; October 18, 2017; [<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/respond-student-entitlement/>] October 31, 2017.

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students endorse an entitled attitude ("I'm paying for the class and that entitles me to use my phone if I want to"), telling them that's wrong isn't likely to change the attitude. It helps if teachers clarify their expectations with constructive positive language and even more importantly with discussions of the rationales on which those expectations rest. Teacher authority gets most students to follow the rules, but force doesn't generally change attitudes and those are what need to be fixed in this case.

This an important and complex issue, difficult to explore deeply in a single post.

References:

Elias, R. Z. (2017). Academic entitlement and its relationship to cheating ethics. *Journal of Education for Business*, 92 (4), 194-199.

Greenberger, E., et. al. (2008). Self-entitled college students: Contributions of personality, parenting and motivational factors. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 37, 1193-1204.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Student Entitlement: Key Questions and Short Answers*; *Faculty Focus*; October 4, 2017; [<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/student-entitlement-key-questions-short-answers/>] October 31, 2017.