Faculty's Perceptions of Students' Characteristics: A for Effort Please

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This pilot study explored how undergraduate students are perceived by higher education faculty regarding their initiative and abilities. Faculty tended to agree that students are engaged in class, but more specific skills and attitudes needed to perform successfully in college are not as apparent to them. Around half of faculty respondents with at least 10 years experience in higher education agreed these skills and abilities are declining. Emergent themes from comments suggest faculty believe students' skills and work ethic have declined while their sense of entitlement (e.g., to high grades) has increased. Comments also suggest faculty believe the decline is a result of a lack of preparation in basic skills from secondary school, the overall culture and politics of secondary education, students' unrealistic perceptions of the expectations in higher education, and students' active lifestyles outside of classes.

Keywords: higher education, student characteristics, faculty perceptions, student initiatives, student abilities

"Today the students expect an A for effort, not achievement" ~professor, survey respondent

A 2009 New York Times article touched off a flurry of discussion about students' sense of entitlement—specifically, the belief on the part of college students that showing up for class, and perhaps doing the readings for said class, ought to be sufficient for a high grade (Roosevelt, 2009). The study discussed in the article (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008) found that a third of students at the University of California, Irvine expected B's for attending class and 40% percent expected B's for reading assigned work. One of the professors interviewed for the Times article noted that many of his students challenged his explanation of a C, which he defined as "if they just do what they are supposed to do and meet the standard requirements." Instead, he told the reporter, "They see the default grade as an A."

As faculty members at a medium size public university in the Midwest, we have experienced similar expectations from our own students. In our classes, we both find that students who have never received "anything less than an A" are no longer rare. It is not unusual, perhaps even typical, for our students to express a belief that the amount of time spent on a paper or project should have a direct correlation to the grade they receive. In other words, any attempt at a paper should lift their grade significantly above a C. Colleagues at our university and on other campuses anecdotally confirmed our own experiences with this entitlement as well. As a result, we began to wonder how widespread these perceptions might actually be among faculty; we also wondered what faculty saw as contributing factors to such attitudes. The purpose of this pilot study was to gather data from professors at Illinois colleges and universities regarding their undergraduate students' characteristics (as related to academic achievement), along with how these perspectives have changed over the years, in an effort to consider this tension more effectively.

Higher Education: Expectations and Context

Outside of their representation in national reports and surveys, there is little in-depth literature that discusses professors' perceptions of undergraduates' capabilities and the personality traits and skills that they bring to the college experience. While students have been assessed regarding their expectations of higher education, professors, and preferred styles of instruction and assessment (Greenberger et al., 2008; Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000; Strage, 2008; Twenge, 2009), there is little that examines in greater depth the expectations that professors have of students, in terms of performance and engagement. Collier and Morgan (2007) are one exception; they discuss what they label the "college student role," which "enables young people to understand their instructors' expectations and to apply their existing skills to meet those expectations successfully" (p. 425). Their sample of faculty agreed that students who understood and met expectations were more likely to be successful in college regardless of their actual capabilities. The struggling students they interviewed, whether first-generation or traditional (students with at least one college graduate parent) students, tended to believe that the professor was not clear enough about assignments or expected behaviors and felt that professors were not understanding of the various demands on their time.

There is some evidence that professors are frustrated with many students' attitudes about what constitutes college-level work and achievement (Pitts, White, & Harrison, 1999; Sanoff, 2006). There is literature that discusses students' self-assessments of contributions to classes as compared to their professors' (Fassinger, 1996; Fritschner, 2000; Meyer, 2007), confirming that the two groups' perceptions of, for example, participation or preparedness, are often very different. Most recently, the study by Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, and Farrugia (2008) publicized in mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* and *USA Today* documented professors' perceptions of the "entitlement" of undergraduates who, at least in this data set, appear to believe that good grades should result from modest effort and who unapologetically demand such consideration from their teachers. This disconnect regarding effort and ability on the part of students has been studied by others (see, for example, Gaultney & Cann, 2001; Twenge, 2009; Williams & Clark, 2004), though Hogge (2009) argues persuasively that it is next to impossible to separate effort from mastery entirely when considering how to assess a student overall.

There are a number of factors that could impact the differing expectations of students and professors; Greenberger et al., (2008), for example, discuss the possibility that student expectations may be a result of increased parental pressure, a sense of competition with peers and family members, and stronger feelings of achievement anxiety. In addition, external factors, including the quality of students' preparation for college level work (AACU, 2002); the possibility of grade inflation masking actual levels of mastery of content (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010), and a lack of rigor in the college experience itself (Arum & Roksa, 2011), may contribute to the divergence between the two groups.

Transitions: High School to College

Recent national reports have sounded an alarm about students entering higher education in the twenty-first century, reflecting concerns about the secondary experience and the impact of this experience on readiness for college. These reports cite any number of issues, including undemanding classes, poor counseling and direction, low expectations of both students and teachers, excessive reliance on standardized testing, and weak high school senior years (AACU, 2002); "Generation Me" characteristics such as decreased self-reliance and increased narcissism (Twenge, 2009); and the influence of traditional versus non-traditional backgrounds (Strage, 2008) on student expectations. After being created by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education's thirteen-member panel of governors, legislators, educators, and private sector leaders released a final report in 2005 that bluntly asserted:

> The lack of compatibility between K-12 and higher education policies and practices is one of the great failings of American education. Making the transition from high school to college is neither easy nor smooth. The fundamental disconnection between K-12 and higher education undercuts the high aspirations of hundreds of thousands of young people who want to go to college. (NCAHE, 2005, p. 17)

One of the suggestions the Commission made was to provide secondary students with courses in high school that better prepared them for college-level standards, and they noted, "While recent reports differ about the extent of K-12 progress in improving student preparation, they agree too few students are taking and mastering the core curriculum and the skills required for a successful collegiate career" (2005, p. 23). A recent American College Testing, Inc. (ACT) report (2009) echoed concerns about misalignments between postsecondary and high school teachers' perceptions of student capabilities in terms of readiness for college—specifically, in terms of the impact of state standards and state graduation requirements on achievement; readiness for college level work; and ability to handle college-level reading. The ACT survey also revealed differences between high school and postsecondary educators' ratings of what was important within content areas.

For example, in English/writing, professors rate proper usage of punctuation higher in importance for incoming students than do high school teachers; high

school teachers believe writing to analyze literature is a critical skill, while professors downplay its importance for college success. Professors feel that mastery of fundamental math topics is much more significant for incoming students, while high school teachers tend to rate advanced topics (e.g., functions) as more important. In essence, high school teachers report that their students are readier to take on more demanding expectations than postsecondary teachers perceive these students as being able to handle.

The Greater Expectations National Panel, made up of leading education, private sector, public policy, and community figures and sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), spent two years analyzing American higher education, from community colleges to private institutions. The panel concluded in their final report:

> Preparation for higher learning has not kept pace with access. Less than one-half of students who enter college directly from high school complete even a minimally defined college preparatory program. Only 40 percent of school teachers hold the high expectations for performance that would ready students for college-level work. Once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses. Those students requiring the most remedial work are the least likely to persist and graduate. (AACU, 2002, p. viii)

Finally, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education strongly recommended in their 2006 report that higher education "assume responsibility for working with the K–12 system to ensure that teachers are adequately trained, curricula are aligned and entrance standards are clear" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 17). Then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings turned her attention to higher education accountability after the federal No Child Left Behind law was launched as the most significant catalyst for K-12 accountability in American history. This nineteen-member panel, appointed by Spellings, was composed of university presidents, CEOs, policymakers, and researchers. In its discussion of issues of college access and student success, the panel quotes a chancellor as describing the twelfth grade as a "vast wasteland" (p. 17). Among other recommendations, the Commission advocated using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 12th grade test data to measure "college and workforce readiness and provide disaggregated data in state-by-state reports" (p. 18), as well as the alignment of K–12 graduation standards with college and employer expectations.

"Grade Fog": What Does a Grade Mean Anymore?

Ironically, while concerns about the overall readiness of students for college work have grown, assessments of college students' work seem to have trended upward (e.g., rising grade point averages; higher numbers of A's awarded). Grade inflation has been recognized as a problem since the 1960s (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010), even in elementary and secondary schools, leading one superintendent to coin the term "grade fog"— rewarding compliance and effort rather than mastery of a subject (Tyre, 2010). It is arguable that distorted expectations around performance certainly might be one result of distorted assessment practices, influencing students and teachers alike to acclimate to lower standards (whether knowingly or not). Some research has found not only undergraduate grades trending upwards, but doing so in the context of shrinking study and preparation time on the part of undergraduates (Babcock & Marks, 2010; Faculty Survey of Student Engagement [FSSE], 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2008).

Bracey (1994) reported that while there is a great deal of speculation and much anecdotal evidence about grade inflation in lower grades, there is a lack of empirical evidence documenting the extent—or the existence—of the problem. There are certainly indications that scores on K-12 standardized tests have been inflated by a variety of means. Reed (2009) compared the standardized test scores of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test and No Child Left Behind state-mandated tests and concluded that expectations in the form of lowered cut (passing or proficiency) scores were evident for fourth-grade African-American students; this means students attained a "proficient" score due to, essentially, the bar being lowered. Koretz (2008, 2009) has discussed intense test preparation of students, leading to scores that he suggests are more likely to reflect test-taking competency than actual mastery of the subject. While these are not teacher-generated grades, they may suggest a culture of distortion regarding student assessment. There is some work on grade inflation in K-12 schooling (see, for example, Camara, Kimmel, Scheuneman, & Sawtell, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2008, and Ziomek & Svec, 1997, for high school), though there is more for higher education (see, for example, Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010; Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). A thorough recounting of this research is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there appears to be a growing belief that even in elementary school "grade fog" (Tyre, 2010) needs to be addressed. Tyre (2010), in a recent *New York Times* article, describes a number of school districts across the country confronting the fact that gaps between teacher-generated grades and standardized examination scores were too large and too persistent to ignore, especially in a data-driven age of accountability. As one principal noted, "Over time, we began to realize that many teachers had been grading kids for compliance—not for mastering the course material….A portion of our A and B students were not the ones who were gaining the most knowledge but the ones

who had learned to do school the best."

Such inflation seems to continue in higher education. A recent report by Rojstaczer and Healy (2010) shared the researchers' findings after examining historical and recent grading patterns at American four-year colleges and universities (comparing contemporary grades from over 160 colleges and universities in the United States with a combined enrollment of over 2,000,000 students with archived grades from over 80 schools). They concluded that the mean grade point average of a given school is highly correlated with the selectivity of its admissions and its status as public or private, and observed:

> […] it is difficult to ascribe this rise in grades to increases in student achievement. Students' entrance test scores have not increased (College Board, 2007), students are increasingly disengaged from their studies (Saenz et al., 2007), and the literacy of graduates has declined (Kutner et al., 2006). A likely influence is the emergence of the now common practice of requiring student-based evaluations of college teachers. Whatever the cause, colleges and universities are on average grading easier than ever before. (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010, para. 6)

The College Culture: Are Students Helped to Slide?

Arum and Roksa's (2011, p. 4) examination of undergraduates who are "academically adrift" reports that students' lack of academic focus (e.g., decreased time spent studying)

> […] has had little impact on their grade point averages and often only relatively modest effects on their progress towards degree completion as they have developed and acquired "the art of college management," in which success is achieved primarily not through hard work but through "controlling college by shaping schedules, taming professors and limited workload." (from Nathan, 2006, p. 113)

In addition, Arum and Roksa discuss Kuh's (2003) contention that there is a "disengagement compact" between professors and students, who share an unspoken agreement to not ask too much of each other. George Kuh, founding director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, coined this term to capture the "bargain" made by professors and students, saying, "The existence of this bargain is suggested by the fact that at a relatively low level of effort, many students get decent grades—B's and sometimes better. There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning" (Kuh, 2003, p. 28). The disengagement compact, coupled with increased pressure on professors to engage in research and scholarship (Bauerlein, 2009) and the increased reliance

on student evaluations as a measure of teacher effectiveness, can contribute to an implicit message that hard work and effort that leads to mastery of content may not be critical to degree attainment.

Purpose of the Study

As discussed above, there is evidence for real concern regarding the undergraduate experience at American colleges and universities, but we know little about, specifically, professors' concerns except as collected and reported in large survey research such as FSSE or through anecdotes. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the perceptions of professors in Illinois institutions of higher education regarding both their undergraduate students' characteristics and their perceptions of change in these characteristics over time. Understanding more specifically the concerns faculty have about both student skills and attitudes is critical to making decisions about how to address these concerns.

In particular, as teacher educators, we cannot minimize the possibility that many students arrive at college having been socialized into an existing paradigm of assessment and achievement that may well have served to reinforce unrealistic expectations. Whether due to disconnects between secondary and post-secondary faculty definitions of college readiness, or due to lowered expectations for students that may start prior to matriculation, it is critical to find ways to effectively address the resulting contradictory perceptions. Concerns about undergraduate skills and work ethic are found across disciplines, but teacher education has a particular obligation to examine its role in fostering such expectations (Zirkel, 1999) and may be well advised to reflect on its obligation to prepare K-12 teachers who are able to consider student assessment through a critical lens.

The initial data from this pilot should offer illumination of specific concerns higher education faculty hold about undergraduates and about the challenges they see themselves facing as educators. In addition to this broader purpose, we wanted to examine whether and how well our constructed survey items for this pilot study would fall into two categories, student initiatives and student abilities, and whether faculties' perceptions of student initiatives would lead to higher perceptions of student abilities. Lastly, this research data will also provide a foundation for developing a follow up survey instrument for examining if and how faculty perceptions of students' characteristics affect choices about classroom instruction and assessment.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this research were undergraduate faculty in selected disciplines at all 47 Illinois colleges and universities (four-year, private and

Table 1
Frequency of Position by Year

Current position	Total years teaching			Total
	Under 10	11-20 years	Over 20 years	
Full professor	6	77	185	268
Associate professor	90	143	59	292
Assistant professor	249	50	9	308
Non-tenure position	124	55	29	208
Emeritus faculty	1	1	18	20
Total	470	326	300	1096

public) that have undergraduate teacher education programs[1]. Teacher education, business, biology, chemistry, history, philosophy, physics, psychology, and sociology faculty were included in the survey pool. These were selected to provide a broad range of "hard" and "soft" disciplines[2] (Biglan, 1973). Subjects such as English were deliberately not chosen because of their presumed emphasis on improving skills like writing.

Response rate and limitations. The respondents who returned 1101 usable surveys included 208 faculty in non-tenured positions, 268 full professors, 292 associate professors, and 309 assistant professors. Of these, 470 had been teaching for less than 10 years, while 326 had taught for 11-20 years and 30 had more than 20 years of experience. Some participants did not respond to the demographic questions. The response rate for males and females was fairly even. Almost half the responses (44%) were from faculty in teacher education and business, with biology and psychology contributing a little over 10% of the responses each, and the other disciplines each comprising less than 10% of responses.

The online questionnaire was sent as a link via email to all potential undergraduate faculty in these nine disciplines after email contact information was obtained from college and university department websites. In the case of disciplines such as teacher education and business, this meant inclusion of a range of departments that presumably enrolled undergraduates (e.g., curriculum and instruction and educational psychology; marketing or management). A total of 6903 surveys were sent to faculty across these 47 schools. The total 1101 usable surveys constituted a 16% response rate (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2008). This response rate is partly due to the large survey net cast in an attempt to make sure all possible undergraduate faculty at a given institution were contacted. That net almost certainly "caught" graduate faculty, especially likely at larger institutions; 34 of 47 schools had both undergraduate and graduate education programs. These faculty could not be identified from department websites, but were then sorted out per survey design, so that any responses they may have submitted were not included in the final data analysis. This in and of itself should not skew the data. In addition, the higher number of returns from teacher education and business may simply reflect larger departments with more faculty members, or may skew the findings since other disciplines posted lower response rates. Finally, it is possible that those who took the initiative to respond to our survey had strong opinions in either a positive or a negative direction about their students. We are therefore cautious in claiming to be able to make generalizations.

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[1] As teacher educators, the authors were interested in studying education as a stand-alone discipline and also in comparison to other disciplines.
[2] Biglan (1973) classified disciplines as hard or soft depending on the degree of paradigm development in the field, resulting in a high or low level of consensus regarding theory, methods, techniques, and problems.

An additional possible impact on response rate is the nature of online surveys. In a meta-analysis, Shih and Fan (2009) show that email surveys generally have a 20% lower response rate than traditional mailed survey forms. Discomfort may play a part in this; lower response rates could be due to a lack of experience with technology or to concerns about confidentiality or other issues regarding identity or responses, as even anonymous responses can be traced back to IP addresses (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). Agreeing to the medium of the survey was a first requirement in whether or not potential respondents chose to participate.

Instrument and Analysis

As a section of a larger survey, the data from this pilot study represents responses to items regarding undergraduate students' characteristics that are related to students' success in college (e.g., critical thinking skills, writing skills, engagement in class; see Table 2 for complete list). After reviewing the limited literature available (for example, Faculty Survey of Student Engagement survey items), we hypothesized that students' characteristics may be perceived by professors in two ways and created survey items to reflect these emphases. One focus is related to students' *initiatives*, or the actions students take in order to prepare to contribute meaningfully to the class experience, and another focus is related to students' *abilities*, or the knowledge and skills students actually demonstrate through their class involvement and the work they produce (see Table 3). Faculty colleagues and a consultant trained in research design and data analysis helped to refine the survey items.

A total of eleven items related to student characteristics were created, each with a corresponding question about changes in that characteristic over time. Responses for each item were on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with the middle option being "no opinion." Response options for questions regarding changes were on a 4-point scale ranging from "greatly decreased" to "greatly increased," as well as a middle option for "no change."

Our quantitative analysis began with an examination of descriptive statistics regarding the percentages of faculty who agreed with the statements in the survey. The percentages reported are based on those who responded to each question, not on the total number of surveys submitted. Those who skipped questions, resulting in missing data, are excluded on an item-by-item basis. We then examined descriptive statistics for only those professors with 10 or more years of experience for questions regarding changes in students' characteristics. Next, we ran a factor analysis to confirm how well the selected items fit into the categories we hypothesized.

An open-ended question at the end asked for additional comments. These responses were analyzed using a constant comparative coding scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify additional themes beside those provided in the initial categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We coded the comments using two approaches: Miles and Huberman's (1994) "start list" of codes (made up of survey items) and the "grounded" approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which yielded secondary codes based on comments that emerged from the data.

Both authors' analyzed comments, using the start list categories and adding additional secondary codes as seemed appropriate. We then discussed the variations and came to agreement as to whether a code should be retained or not, as well as which codes accrued to particular comments. Once the quantitative and qualitative analyses were complete, we examined them for matching or non-matching results. We looked for themes from the qualitative data that could serve as possible explanations for the quantitative results. For example, while the comment "When [students] do not earn an "A" on an assignment they expect detailed explanations/justification for it. When you give them vaild [sic] reasons, they tend to find excuses why they should be excused from the expectations" was categorized under the start list code "effort/success connection," we also coded it as "entitlement" and "work ethic."

Results: What the Professors Said

We explored the percentage of respondents who agreed with statements on the survey about students' academic characteristics and with statements about changes in students' academic characteristics. Table 2 illustrates the percentage of faculty who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the eleven items about students' characteristics. For six items, 50% or more agreed that students demonstrate the noted characteristics. Five items resulted in less than 50% agreeing that their students have or demonstrate these characteristics. These items are about students' preparation for class, higher order thinking skills, willingness to struggle with ideas, and writing skills.

The two items that generated the highest rate of agreement from professors were questions about students' perceptions of the worth of the class and about the amount of contact with students outside class. These were followed in frequency of agreement by two broad questions focused on students' engagement in class and on overall quality of student performance. More explicit questions about students' skills, such as ability to express complex thought and ability to write satisfactorily, tended to garner less agreement.

Table 2 also shows the percentage of respondents who reported change in a given characteristic since they began teaching in higher education. For most items, very few faculty indicated an *improvement* in students' academic characteristics. The percentage who noted there has been *no change* in the characteristic is similar to the percentage who noted there has been a *decline*. Writing skills is the area in which the greatest number of faculty perceived a decline in students' abilities.

Table 2
Percentage of Agreement with Student Characteristics (SC) Items

	Student Characteristics		Changes in SC	
	Agree to strongly agree	Disagree to strongly disagree	Increased to greatly increased	Decreased to greatly decreased
Students see my course as worthwhile.	82%	13%	14%	12%
Students contact me outside of class to talk about academic issues related to the class.	70%	30%	16%	24%
In general, students are engaged in class (e.g., willing to participate, active listening, and note taking).	63%	36%	11%	41%
The overall quality of student performance is adequate.	58%	42%	10%	57%
Students are able to master challenging work.	56%	42%	6%	43%
Students demonstrate that they understand the connection between effort and success in the classroom.	52%	47%	5%	46%
In general, students prepare for class by completing homework or assigned readings.	44%	54%	4%	47%
Students display critical thinking skills.	45%	54%	7%	45%
In general, students are willing to struggle with complicated ideas and theories.	38%	61%	6%	52%
In general, students' ability to present or express complex thought is satisfactory.	36%	63%	5%	55%
In general, students' writing skills (e.g., grammar, spelling, sentence structure) are satisfactory.	30%	69%	8%	62%

Table 3
Factor Loadings for Student Characteristic Items

	Academic abilities	Academic initiatives
Ability to present complex thought is satisfactory	.82	
Writing skills are satisfactory	.70	
Display critical thinking skills	.77	
Overall quality of student performance is adequate	.79	
Are able to master challenging work	.73	
Are engaged in class		.73
Are willing to struggle with complicated ideas		.70
Understand the connection between effort and success		.68
Prepare for class by completing homework		.68
See my course as worthwhile		.63
Contact me outside of class to talk about academics		.51

This is followed by perceived declines in higher level thinking, in the ability to present complex thought, and in the willingness to struggle with complex ideas.

To explore our hypothesis that faculty perceptions of students may fall into two categories, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (see Table 3 for factor loadings). Both factors resulted in strong alpha levels, which suggest that the survey items do measure the underlying factors, or, in other words, the broader categories of abilities and initiatives (Cronbach's αs = .73 and 82). The correlation between the two factors is .66 (p < .01, R^2 = .43). This is a strong positive correlation, although the initiatives factor is a stronger predictor of faculties' perceptions of abilities than vice versa. For every one increase in faculties' perception of students' initiatives, their perceptions of the students' abilities increase by .75 points on our five point scale (F(1, 1099) = 835.06, p < .01). Abilities were also a significant predictor of initiatives, but the increase in perceptions of initiatives for every one increase in perception of abilities was lower at .58.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative survey data provided additional information on professors' general perceptions of students' performance, via 303 comments made in response to open-ended survey questions. Respondents appeared to use the comment opportunity to expound on their perceptions and/or to offer ideas about what contributed to the problems they identified. As a result, the themes that emerged from the comments reflected more specific foci than the broader abilities and initiative categories. Comments were grouped into four main themes: *work ethic, academic skills, other contributing factors*, and *implications for higher education*. The notion of work ethic, in particular, seemed to resonate, as respondents offered observations about the quality of current students' work ethic or about a decline in students' work ethic or an increase in a sense of entitlement. The next highest number of responses focused on academic skills; under this umbrella, respondents paid particular attention to *changes* in skills rather than making direct statements about students' abilities or inabilities (though basic skills in writing and math were identified by approximately 16% of commenters with some variation on "inadequate" or "terrible"). The third theme reflects statements that suggest reasons for the changes in students' work ethic and for academic skills in particular. Many respondents linked these two, suggesting that changes in skills are related to changes in work ethic and/or a sense of entitlement. A significant number of respondents expressed a belief that these attitudes have some foundation in students' secondary education experience, or, less often, prior college experience.

In the open-ended questions, there were positive observations about students from about 6% (19) of those

responding, but overall, professors used the option to express concern, frustration, or pessimism. The sections that follow provide descriptions and examples of each of the themes from the qualitative data, concluding with participants' thoughts about the implications of these limitations for higher education and their own work as educators.

Work Ethic

Under the work ethic theme, which was reflected in 29% (88) of comments, responses fell into these categories: students' sense of entitlement (50 of 88 comments); students' understanding of the connection between effort and success (52 of 88 comments); students' lack of independence (18) and unwillingness to struggle (33); and students' engagement with (54) and preparation for (56) class.

Entitlement. Faculty who discussed this perception agreed that there is a broad sense of entitlement among students—that students believe they deserve a passing grade, or even a superior grade, simply because they registered, paid tuition, attended class, and/or turned in homework, with the actual quality of their work being a less relevant factor. Additionally, faculty perceived students as having expectations that they (faculty) should be readily available to meet student needs and to share responsibility for students' performance.

> • Students have a sense of entitlement, that they are here to receive a degree, not to work for it. It has very much become a "customer is always right" situation.
> • Students have more of a sense of entitlement. They don't see you as an expert but as an employee. You aren't deferred too [*sic*] as much. You are questioned more and not in a good way, but in a way that seems that you are being put to the test. Like you have to prove to them that you are worthy of their attention.

Effort and success. There was a strong sense that more students seemed to have a distorted perception of the connection between effort and success. Professors indicated that effort is critical for success, which they defined as mastery of the material, but is not sufficient in and of itself. They complained that students seem to believe that effort should lead to a good grade for the simple reason that students "tried"—regardless of whether the student attained mastery or not. Specifically, many respondents felt that students tended to define effort as the *amount of time* spent on the assigned work.

> Regarding the student perception of the connection between effort and success, I believe many of them do see that connection. However, they fail to see the mediating connection: effort → quality work → success. They fail to recognize that working really, really hard doesn't matter at all if the quality of their product is not

improved by that hard work. Consequently, many students get upset when they receive a poor grade on a poorly done project that they nevertheless put a lot of effort into.

On the other hand, 27 respondents referenced students' willingness to "get by" rather than to challenge themselves. These faculty felt that many students were less interested in mastering the content and skills needed to succeed than in what one called "jumping through required hoops"; this was an especially significant concern for those faculty who taught general education requirements as opposed to classes in a student's major.

> • Student interest has shifted to completing degree requirements—check the items off the list and this has displaced a genuine interest in becoming competent in their subject.
> • I teach general education courses—in general these are presented as mere requirements that you "have" to take—students are not encouraged to see them as the back-bone of their LIBERAL ARTS education. In theory, these should be the most important, but they see them as classes that they are forced to take, that they should ignore or not put much effort into, and, in general, I see them very resistant to putting any effort in. They see them as easy A classes.

Willingness to struggle. Some respondents made a further connection between the effort/success nexus and what they saw as students' unwillingness to struggle in order to reach mastery. For some this unwillingness translated into students wanting to be "spoon-fed" the correct responses for tests and other assessments:

> I also sense widespread satisfaction with a mediocre level of effort and engagement in their learning. It is rare for me to find a student at [my institution] who strives for excellence, genuine excellence. If a student instinctively knows how far off that goal really is, s/he gives up and is easily satisfied with less than excellent.

For other respondents the unwillingness meant that students are less willing to tolerate ambiguity, to the point that assignments and expectations include ever-increasing amounts of details. Progress, especially in the form of "points acquired," must be documented regularly. Many professors, like this one, wrote of students' lack of independence and initiative:

> Students seem to struggle in reading for information just for what I consider to be basic assignments. They seem to prefer me telling them what to do instead of read[ing]. I am careful to present all assignments with careful regard to visual presentation with generous use of bolding, spacing, and underlining. Students tend to blame me for missing a portion of the assignment even when I read the directions back to them that they missed.

Low levels of work ethnic, a sense of entitlement, an unwillingness to struggle, and a lack of independence are all attitudes that faculty saw reflected in students' lack of engagement and preparation for class as well. Many faculty complained that students do not participate unless there is some type of credit attached. Some faculty reported that students do not complete assigned readings or even buy the required texts for the class. More specifically, professors noted that students openly admit that they only want to read or study what is needed for the exams:

> They want "what will be on the exam? what is the answer?" I have been challenged in class while going over review questions: "Are these the questions that will be on the exam?" me [*sic*]: of course not; they are similar to the exam questions. student [*sic*]: "Why are you wasting our time?"

Comments about changes in work ethic over time noted a decline in the effort students are willing to expend; by far this was the biggest change, reported by roughly half of the respondents who identified work ethic as an issue.

> In my first years, students who were pushed to work hard "pushed back" by rising up to the challenge. (Not all of them, but as a whole). Now they tend to "break" when pushed (as a whole. Thankfully, there are still exceptions who work hard and rise to the challenges.) Don't they expect to be pushed in college?

Academic Skills

In terms of the theme of academic skills, respondents, whether referencing current students or considering change over time, frequently noted changes in specific skills they perceive as having declined in quality, particularly math skills (20 comments) and writing skills (56 comments). Almost half of those responding (150) noted concerns with cognitive skills, specifically with one or more of the following: students' ability to think critically, students' ability to present complex thought in written form, and students' ability to master challenging material.

> • The students we now see only expect to memorize—there is little critical thinking or mastery of concepts.
> • Many [students] can perform to their own satisfaction on exams without reaching their full potential in the areas of critical thinking and complex argument.
> • The skills set they arrive with […] hinders their ability to understand complexity, to synthesize information or express either what they know or what they do not know.

Other Contributing Factors

The explanations offered by respondents as to why students struggle with particular initiatives or abilities fall primarily into two categories: 1) the limitations of K-12 schooling (primarily a perceived lack of preparation for higher education at the high school level and/or the pervasiveness of standardized testing (47 comments) and 2) the demands on students outside of their educational responsibilities (15 comments). Overall, however, the majority of the more than 300 open-ended comments reflected complaints and concerns but offered nothing in the way of professors' ideas about contributing factors. A significant number of faculty did consider their own responsibility, in terms of pedagogical and curriculum choices, in offering thoughts about how to mitigate these challenges. We will discuss these comments below.

The K-12 environment. Faculty expressed a belief that the decline in student *abilities* is due to the inadequate preparation students receive, especially in secondary education, for success in college. They presumed a lack of exposure to appropriate content, limited reinforcement of writing skills, and few opportunities to practice higher order thinking skills during this time. Some also pointed a finger at a standardized testing culture prompted by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, conjecturing that a focus on testing and test preparation has left students less able to grapple with abstract thought and complex ideas.

> • Students are still mostly unaware of how learning happens when they come to college and they expect to just memorize information, especially in the sciences. High schools have got to quit focusing so heavily on content: if a student has ever pipetted or run a gel in a HS biology lab, they believe they know it all and consider our cell biology core class a waste of time and feel we are being too hard on them.
> • The emphasis on standardized fact-based proficiency tests seems to be having a negative impact on our students [*sic*] preparation for study at the college level. This has also translated into limited knowledge about how to study for different levels of understanding concepts and recall of facts.

Additional demands. In addition, students' attention is frequently elsewhere, according to some respondents, and it was suggested this could be related to either significant responsibilities in their personal lives or the distraction of social opportunities. There does not appear to be any distinction made between "traditional" (e.g., 18-22 year olds) undergraduates and those returning to school after a break as older students in regards to comments about the use of time and time management.

> • Students are busier than ever; most take too many courses while working outside the university, and the amount of time and attention they can give to each class has diminished.
> • They place other events in their life before their course work and expect special treatment and scheduling for any personal reason (clubs,

vacations, weddings, holidays, long weekends off, parties, etc.).

Implications for Higher Education

Some professors discussed their belief that higher education itself contributes to the problems they perceive, acknowledging that students' prior experiences are not always the sole reason for their lack of engagement or their attitudes. Comments in this vein fell into two distinct themes: 1) the belief that some institutions have lowered standards, in the process admitting or retaining a lower caliber of student (21 comments), and 2) reflections on respondents' own roles in acknowledging and addressing the challenges (53 comments). The latter provide food for thought in terms of conclusions and recommendations, which we will explore below.

Lowered standards. These respondents (who tended to have had longer careers in higher education) felt that either their own institutions or postsecondary education in general were lowering standards, admitting and/or retaining students who were less prepared or more challenged or "borderline" students than in the past.

• Years ago many fewer students went to college and they were of over-all [*sic*] better quality to begin with. I've been teaching for 30 years. Today, many, many more students go to college so, of course, lots of signs of academic excellence have gone down since we are herding in the C students with the A and B students now.
• While we collectively complain that our students are ill-prepared coming in, we do little to ensure they are well-prepared the first year or two here or on their way out.

Faculty Roles and Responsibilities

Despite, or perhaps because of, beliefs that unprepared and disengaged students are a clear challenge, 17% of professors discussed the changes and adaptations they have made in response. Some of these comments appeared to reflect a sense of resignation; others, however, were presented in a positive light that suggested an educator who saw the challenge as a possibility. These responses prompt important questions about the tensions underlying different perceptions of the "college student role," in particular, where responsibility lies in successfully negotiating these tensions. This will be discussed in more depth in the conclusions.

For some professors, the way they approach the class makes a difference. One wrote, "I take a controversial approach to many classes and I find students as willing today as they used to be to engage with the material." Another noted, "In all my classes I stress considerations of the big picture and critical thinking. Therefore I see the results in my classroom." One second-career professor wrote, "I'm doing it because it is fun and rewarding. I think students pick up on that and respond positively." Still others now provide more structure—

detailed rubrics, detailed notes on assignments, opportunities to re-submit work based on feedback.

Some faculty noted that they felt they had developed into stronger teachers over time; as one professor wrote, "I honestly believe, if I teach well, they learn well." Some felt that conveying high expectations resulted in students rising to the task; one wrote, "If I stay on them, I usually get improvement across the board." Another stated, "If they [students] are not showing the skills and behaviors you listed, it is largely because we do not teach these skills and expect these behaviors."

Conclusions and Recommendations

We must concern ourselves more with managing the cards we are dealt, and worry less about how the cards were made. ~professor, survey respondent

The quantitative results of this pilot study confirm our hypothesis that the survey items group into two factors, or areas of focus. We found that professors may indeed view students differently in regards to their initiatives and their abilities and that perceptions of students' initiatives is a stronger predictor of how faculty view students' abilities than abilities is of initiatives. Looking at the individual items, we see that almost two-thirds of faculty agreed that students are engaged in class. However, when asked about more specific skills (such as writing proficiency and the ability to present complex thought) needed to perform successfully at the college level, less than 40% agreed that students are able to perform adequately. Over half of the faculty respondents with more than ten years of teaching experience agreed these skills and abilities are declining in their students.

Not only do faculty feel that students' abilities have decreased, but in terms of initiatives, just over half also believe that students' willingness to struggle with complexity has become more limited—and this lack of willingness has an impact on other factors related to success in higher education, such as preparation for class and an understanding of the connection between effort and success. A lack of work ethic and a decline in the effort students are willing to give to classes were the most commonly mentioned complaints in the written comments. Work ethic and related characteristics such as entitlement and dependence were discussed not only as current issues, but also as examples of significant change in student attitudes over time. For many faculty, these attitudes were and are directly related to student skill level and performance. This pattern suggests that respondents do not believe that today's students are qualitatively different in their ability to learn math, writing, and thinking skills, but rather are being held back by two and perhaps three main factors: weaker skills and less content knowledge upon graduation from high school; problematic attitudes regarding their responsibility for success in college classes; and, possibly, academics as only one of many demands on their time. These concerns are encapsulated in the following comment:

There have always been unprepared students dating back to the age of Socrates and as long as universities have existed. What is new today is that the percent of students that are immature, lacking basic skills and minimum levels of content knowledge is higher than in previous times and that this problem is increasing at an alarming rate.

While, as noted, much of the quantitative and most of the qualitative data conveyed significant concern regarding student characteristics, a few of the reflections in the comments stood out for their pragmatism. The professor quoted above went on to say:

> We must concern ourselves more with managing the cards we are dealt, and worry less about how the cards were made. That the current cohort of students seems less willing to read "naturally," simply means I need to find ways to "nurture" them to want to read. I also am going to have to spend time teaching them how to read until a new cohort comes along that tends to like to read [...] That they currently come to us less well-prepared as a cohort doesn't excuse us as a collective faculty for establishing standards, creating a curriculum designed to overcome their shortcomings, and then helping them achieve at our levels of expectations.

There are profound questions associated with the issues raised by the perceptions of faculty represented in this data, although it is important to be cautious about generalizations, as respondents may have had particularly strong feelings, both positive and negative, about students. We know already that there are significant concerns about the academic experiences of college students and what they are leaving college actually knowing and able to do (Arum & Roksa, 2011; NSSE, 2008). Grade inflation seems to be real, and calls into question what grade point averages really mean (Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman, 2009; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010). Other new research concludes that students (other than the highest achieving) seem to value (and be more willing to support in the form of increased tuition) institutional spending on student activities, sports, and dormitories rather than instruction, and suggests that schools are better off investing in these areas if they want to attract and retain students (Jacob, McCall, & Stange, 2011).

What do faculty end up doing when they harbor such deep concerns about their undergraduates? Do they "hunker down," draw the line, and hand out Ds and Fs? Do they hold their noses and pass students who have not mastered the material, particularly if they do not have tenure and are subject to appraisal based on student evaluations? Or do they struggle to figure out ways to engage students and bring out the best in them?

As a result of this pilot study, the authors will utilize the data for new research and create survey items, targeted to potential respondents via rigorous sampling methods, with an aim towards understanding more deeply how these perspectives shape professors' instruction and assessment choices in the classroom, particularly when faced with the challenges they describe. Given the rise in undergraduates requiring developmental (also known as remedial) classes[3], it may prove helpful to examine this new data in light of the percentages of students testing into or enrolled in such classes at the institutions represented by respondents. Since the initiatives factor is a predictor of faculties' perceptions of students' abilities we will explore how perceptions of initiatives is related to professors' expectations of students. It is clear that the perceptions of faculty lead to one obvious conclusion: that colleges and universities have tasks beyond academics if they hope to enable students to have a meaningful experience in higher education that truly readies them to be successful once they leave the institution. It would seem that in order for institutions to prepare students to engage with both required and elective content, they must educate students about how to perform in a manner that leads to academic success.

Without addressing the self-serving attitudes and behaviors that students increasingly exhibit, we will continue to see, as shown in this survey, highly pessimistic and disparaging faculty perceptions of students. This is bound to be a problem if performance-based funding (PBF), which is "a decades-old higher education finance strategy that links state funding for public colleges and universities with institutional performance" (Harnisch, 2011, p. 2), takes hold as a viable option. Though not particularly successful before, many states now have more sophisticated educational data systems, and influential policy and reform groups such as the Gates Foundation, the College Board, the National Governors Association, and the Education Commission of the States are behind PBF as a priority for higher education accountability. Illinois, for example, passed PBF legislation in April 2011 and the state's institutions are just beginning to grapple with the implications. Reforms based on these initiatives will have to happen regarding of how successful K-12 public school systems are in addressing their own accountability issues.

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[3] In 2007–08, approximately 36% of first-year undergraduate students reported that they had taken a remedial course at some point in their college career, and 20% of first-year undergraduates reported they had taken at least one remedial course in the 2007–08 academic year. Of that 20%, about 9% reported taking one remedial course, 7% took two, and 4% took three or more (see Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011, p. 70).

As we noted earlier, teacher education programs should be preparing teachers who foster appropriate skills and dispositions, such as strong work ethics and comfort with complexity, in K-12 students; however, the pressure to perform to externally imposed high-stakes standards will continue to challenge teachers in such efforts for the foreseeable future.

Grade inflation and lowered standards, unfortunately, are logical but ultimately imprudent and unethical responses to the dilemma of underperforming student abilities and external accountability demands. With regards to student initiatives—attitudes and behaviors—it is worth noting that York College in Pennsylvania may be in the vanguard with their Center for Professional Excellence, which is designed to "teach" students qualities they need to succeed in the workforce. Data collected from human resources professionals and business leaders by York faculty indicate that, in line with the findings from this study, attitudes and behaviors like the ability to communicate, respectful listening, courtesy, a strong work ethic, and self-confidence rather than a sense of entitlement are seen as critical—and are also seen as lacking.

It seems to make little sense to hope that students will change on their own volition. In a recent online discussion, the president of the Southern Education Foundation, C. Kent McGuire (2011) noted:

> Today's student lives in a world of hyper-connectivity and information exchange. They receive their information in five-minute episodes and it comes in many modalities—sound, text, video. The typical college classroom is a stand and deliver environment that does not foster engagement, interaction or exchange. We might wish today's student could tolerate this dated approach to instruction. But even if they could, the lives many lead do not conform to our conception of the traditional student […] we are working increasingly with students who face competing demands for their time and attention […] Giving students more advice and support and actually explaining to them what we expect them to do would go a long way toward improving student learning outcomes.

The answers likely involve change on two tracks. University efforts, incorporating more effective basic skills programs for new students and some sort of organized effort, like York College's, to deliberately teach student behaviors and attitudes for the workplace, would be helpful in targeting interventions aimed at both students' abilities and initiatives. The other change would have to come from professors, who must struggle with the need to reach all students in real and meaningful ways while maintaining high expectations and offering challenging curriculum. Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all lesson plan for this; but lesson plans may be less

important than flexibility and a willingness to experiment. It is doubtful that we will ever go back to the "old days" when students did not need support to improve their basic skills in the "college student role." External stakeholders—policymakers and taxpayers—don't want to hear why colleges can't deliver. Ultimately, the energy spent on frustration and pessimism will have to be channeled, like it or not, on moving challenging students to where we need them to be.

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