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Students' Perspectives on the First Day of Class: A Replication

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Abstract

Research has shown that first-day practices affect students' motivation, grades, and end of the semester ratings of the professors. However, research on student preferences of first day practices has been conducted at public, predominantly white institutions and has not investigated if first day preferences differ at a private or historically Black university. Therefore, to investigate consistency in preferences across generations and possible differences in preferences at a private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) we assessed first day preferences and compared our results to the original study (Perlman & McCann, 1999). We sampled 230 predominantly Black students from a small private HBCU. Our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann's results, indicating that students desire a general overview, details about grading, and getting to know the professor. Students also disliked poor use of class time and beginning course material on the first day. Analyses revealed differences in the preferences of third and fourth year students compared to first and second year students. Analyses also indicated that in our sample a smaller proportion of students cared about first day information being presented in an understandable contest, and that a higher proportion of our sample cared about setting a fun tone and disliked an uncaring or intimidating environment in contrast to Perlman & McCann's original study.

Keywords

teaching; student perceptions; first day of class

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Students' Perspectives on the First Day of Class: A Replication

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Research has shown that first-day practices affect students' motivation, grades, and end of the semester ratings of the professors. However, research on student preferences of first day practices has been conducted at public, predominantly white institutions and has not investigated if first day preferences differ at a private or historically Black university. Therefore, to investigate consistency in preferences across generations and possible differences in preferences at a private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) we assessed first day preferences and compared our results to the original study (Perlman & McCann, 1999). We sampled 230 predominantly Black students from a small private HBCU. Our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann's results, indicating that students desire a general overview, details about grading, and getting to know the professor. Students also disliked poor use of class time and beginning course material on the first day. Analyses revealed differences in the preferences of third and fourth year students compared to first and second year students. Analyses also indicated that in our sample a smaller proportion of students cared about first day information being presented in an understandable context, and that a higher proportion of our sample cared about setting a fun tone and disliked an uncaring or intimidating environment in contrast to Perlman & McCann's original study.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is affected by situational and contextual factors influenced by societal expectations, norms, task definitions, and social cues (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980; Woodrow, 2001). Cultural norms impact individual learning strategies and learning preferences both internationally and intra-nationally. For example, Chinese students valued learning as a means of self-development and social approval significantly more than Flemish students, while Flemish students devalued conception of understanding when compared to Chinese students (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008). Another study found that Turkish students valued meaning, reproducing and strategic learning strategies more than Taiwanese students (Berberoglu & Hei, 2003). Differences like these can have profound impacts on what students prefer in a learning environment, what they attend to, and what they find most useful. Learning strategies also change within a society. In the 1960's in the wake of the Sputnik crisis, American grade schools made a dramatic change to the math curriculum shifting the focus to abstract algebra and away from arithmetic and times tables. The method was quickly abandoned because it was not in line with the cultural norms at the time (Feynman, 1965). Therefore, it is necessary to include temporal and cultural variety in our investigations of teaching strategies.

Research has identified various teaching strategies that optimize student learning and facilitate the understanding and retention of information (Tomcho et al., 2008). In western contexts, teaching approaches that encourage active engagement with the material, as well as critical thinking and evaluation are known to exert a positive impact on learning outcomes (Butler, Phillmann, & Smart, 2001; Freeman et al., 2007; O'Sullivan & Copper, 2003; Prince & Felder, 2006; Sivan, Wong Leung, Woon, & Kember, 2000; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005). The foundation for these teaching approaches is often established on the first day of class and has been shown to affect the classroom environment, morale, and grades (Herman, Foster, & Hardin, 2010; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). In addition, research has identified specific first-day practices that provide benefits. For instance, students who have been exposed to an effective icebreaker, compared to no icebreaker, reported greater

satisfaction with the course, and deem the course a more valuable learning experience (Herman et al.). In a related study, Wilson and Wilson found that students who experienced a positive first day (learned about the course, grading standards and work required), compared to a negative first day (beginning course material, using the entire class time, and assigning homework), had more positive perceptions of the professor, were more motivated in the course, and had higher end-of-course grades.

Other research indicates that impressions on the first day may contribute to impressions later in the semester. Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) found a positive correlation between end-of-the-semester ratings and ratings after viewing thirty-second, fifteen-second, and six-second nonverbal clips of professors and high school teachers teaching. In the experiment students and adults who had no contact with the professor rated the very short (6s, 15s, or 30s) silent videos of the professors and teachers teaching on a number of behaviors (e.g. accepting, competent, attentive, supportive, etc.). They found that ratings by strangers (adults who had no face to face contact with the professor) and students who had not yet taken the course correlated with students' end of semester ratings. Given these findings, understanding student impressions on the first day of class has broad implications for teaching practices and student success.

To date, three studies have explored students' first-day-of-class preferences (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006; Perlman, & McCann, 1999). Perlman and McCann sampled 570 psychology students attending a regional public university in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. They asked students two questions: (a) what are the most useful things a faculty member can do during a first class meeting, and (b) what are your pet peeves about what faculty do during a first class meeting. They found that students reported liking a general course overview both verbally and in a detailed syllabus (72%), wanted information about the specifics of the class (exams, assignments, how to get a good grade, 26%), and liked when the instructors explained their background and teaching style (18%). Students also reported liking instructors who were accessible, approachable, and supportive (7%), relaxed (5%), and fun (4%). Student pet peeves on the first

day of class included poor use of class time (31%), beginning with course content (29%), a poor overview (16%), meeting the entire time (13%), and icebreakers (54.9%).

In a second, more recent study on students' first-day preferences, Henslee et al. (2006) replicated Perlman and McCann's original study and extended their work by added 5 additional open-ended questions and 22 Likert scale questions. A total of 146 psychology students enrolled in introduction to psychology courses responded to seven open-ended questions assessing overall rating of the first day and the importance of specific first-day activities and answered 22 items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) (Henslee et al., 2006).

Results for the open-ended questions advised that students' ideal first day was very similar to Perlman and McCann's findings and included a review the syllabus (49.5%), an overview of the course (34.9%), contact information (29.5%), and for a small percentage an icebreaker (5.5%). Responses also established that the worst first day would be a lecture (31.5%), an attempt to scare (11%) or intimidate (9.6%) the students.

The responses to the forced choice items indicate that students preferred learning about grading standards, learning what the class is like, and having the professor arrive on time. Students were less interested in learning information about the teacher and the other students, icebreakers, and attendance on the first day. Although an excellent replication and extension of the original Perlman study, the authors did not provide a direct comparison between the two sets of data, nor did they support their categorical breakdown with a factor analysis. In addition both the Perlman and McCann's (1999) study and Henslee et al. (2006) study focus on large public universities and do not report ethnic information on their students.

A final study on best first day practices addresses some, but not all of the issue's identified above. Basset and Nix (2011) surveyed 249 students (135 White, 104 Black, 6 Hispanic, and 5 other) at a small public university on 18 Likert style questions ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) and an anxiety scale. A factor analysis of the Likert questions revealed 5 factors listed in order of importance; *course difficulty, professional information, class content and structure, procedural details, and personal information*. The factor analysis provided important quantitative support for the categories students deem important on the first day of class. However, Basset and Nix did not ask students open-ended questions about the first day of class like Perlman & McCann (1999) and Henslee et al., (2006). Therefore a direct comparison between the original, and follow-up study was not calculated. Also, it is possible that the Likert scale items reveal a more constrained range of answers about the first day of class than open ended questions. Finally, there was no analysis looking at the difference between ethnicities.

Historically Black College and University (HBCU) are institutions of higher education in the United States established before 1964 with the expressed goal of serving the African American community. Research has indicated that students attend an HBCU because they are more likely to receive the attention and support necessary for success (Hammer, 2011). Specifically, survey results demonstrate that Black students from predominantly white institutions feel outnumbered, and students from predominantly Black schools state they receive the help and support needed to succeed. These results are echoed in a large study that investigated the relationship between learning environments, students'

interactions with teachers and peers, sense of belonging, and student success (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010). The model that best described minority students was different than the model that best described majority students. Minority students felt at home in their educational program if they had a good formal relationship with teachers and fellow students. Majority students felt they belonged when they had relationships with fellow students. These findings are particularly interesting when coupled with the finding that feeling like one does not belong for ethnic minority students is an important reason for dropping out (Just, 1999; Swail et al. 2003). Therefore the relationship with teachers kindled on the first day of class may be particularly important for minority students.

Furthermore the type of university may influence student teacher relationships. Research on the impact of faculty behaviors and interactions on student learning and ultimately success indicate that private colleges were more likely than public colleges to have faculty that challenge their students, and that private college faculty were more likely than public college counterparts to value enriching education experiences (Johnson et al., 1998; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Taken together this research suggests a different tone at private and public institutions that might have a direct effect on students' first day preferences. Put another way students at private universities may seek different experiences than students who attend public universities.

Therefore, given the differences in preferences for students who attend private and predominantly Black colleges and the time between the original and follow-up study we believe that it is important to assess first day preferences of students at a private predominantly Black institution. Here we replicated Perlman and McCann's (1999) study on first day preferences at a private historically Black college and predicted that students would value a caring environment and professors who were accessible to a greater degree than the original study. Specifically, it was hypothesized that a larger proportion of students would list an accessible and supportive tone, a relaxed and comfortable tone, or a fun tone when compared to the proportions in the Perlman and McCann study. We also hypothesized that students would list uncaring and intimidating as a pet peeve more often than the Perlman and McCann study.

METHOD

Participants

The department of psychology at a private historically Black liberal arts college collected data from students on the first day of the Spring 2013 semester. The ethical implication of the study were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board. Six faculty members participated by collecting information from all of their undergraduate psychology classes (total classes sampled = 23). Participants were 230 undergraduate students, 63 were first-years, 79 were second years, 43 were third years, and 45 were fourth years. Participants self-reported their year in college. Generally, in the United States students are considered first-years when they have 0 to 29 credits, second years have 30 to 59 credits, third year students have accumulated 60 to 89 hours of college credit and fourth years have 90 or more credits (Baker, 2016).

Procedure

Participants were handed a notecard and read the following

instructions prior to the start of class:

Faculty in the Psychology Department are interested in maintaining and improving their teaching. To that end we are interested in the first class meeting of a course, what works well and what does not. If you have already done this exercise in a psychology class, or do not want to volunteer, leave the card blank. Label this index card Side A and Side B. On Side A put your class standing (first year, sophomore, junior, or senior), and gender (male or female). Based on your experiences as a student, what are the most useful things a faculty member can do during a first class meeting? Please list these on Side A. Based on your experiences as a student, what are your pet peeves about what faculty do during a first class meeting? Please list these on Side B.

Two independent researchers tabulated information from the surveys. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved. If a statement qualified for two different categories, it was only counted in one.

RESULTS

Table 1 categorizes student responses organized into the same categories deemed important to the first day of class by Perlman and McCann (1999). Students listed responses about what is a good practice on the first day of class and what constitutes a pet peeve on the first day of class.

TABLE 1. The First Day of Class				
Category	Works Well		Peeves	
	n	%	n	%
General overview, syllabus, course nature and content, requirements, expectations	159	69.1	1	0
Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading	56	24.3		
Introduces self (background, teaching style) to students	55	23.9	2	.9
First day content is put in context and understandable without having read an assignment	3	1.3	1	.5
Describes why students should take the course and how they may profit from it				
Sets tone of being accessible, supportive	13	5.6		
Icebreakers	13	5.6	35	15
Meet full hour	1	0		
Sets relaxed, comfortable tone	7	3.0		
Sets a fun tone	21	9.1		
Beginning course content (lectures)	5	2.1	53	23
Poor use of class time (non-crucial information, read syllabus, unorganized)			81	35.2
Homework assignment			20	8.6
Instructor uncaring, intimidating			41	17.8
Poor teaching (instructor nervous, monotone, talks too fast, too much material)			21	9.1
Seating Chart			1	0
Teacher late or absent			1	0

What works well. Students preferred a general overview of the course or syllabus (69.1%). They wanted teachers to specifically describe exams, assignments, and grading (24.3%). Explaining background and teaching style was listed as a useful first-class practice by 23.9% of students. Finally, students listed that teachers who set a tone that was fun (9.1%) accessible, approachable, and supportive (5.6%), or relaxed and comfortable (3%), worked well.

Pet Peeves. Student pet peeves on the first day of class included poor use of class time (35.2%), beginning with course content (23%), instructor being uncaring or intimidating (17.8%), poor teaching (9.1%), or a homework assignment (8.7%). A greater number of students listed icebreakers as a pet peeve (15.2%) than a desirable first day practice (5.6%).

Class Differences. Chi-squared analyses compared *listed* and *unlisted* frequencies of the first and second year students (under-class) to third and fourth year students (upper-class). There were no significant differences between under- and upper-class students on what they thought worked well on the first day of class. Our 2 (listed, unlisted) X 2 (underclass, upper-class) chi-square analysis of pet peeves identified that a greater percentage of upper-class students (41%) listed poor use of class time as a pet peeve than under-class students (28%) $\chi^2(1, N = 230) = 6.547, p = .011, \Phi_{Cramer} = .17$. We also found that underclass students listed uncaring (32%) as a pet peeve more often than upper class students (10%) $\chi^2(1, N = 230) = 5.619, p = .021, \Phi_{Cramer} = .16$.

Institutional Differences. A 2 (listed, unlisted) X 2 (Perlman & McCann, Xavier) Chi-squared analysis was also calculated to identify meaningful differences between the Perlman and McCann's study and our replication. To do this analysis we compared *listed* and *unlisted* frequencies of the two studies. When the proportion of students who listed what works well for the two studies were compared using Pearson's chi-squared, it was found that a smaller proportion of students (1.3%) listed that the first day content is put in context and is understandable without having read an assignment compared to the Perlman and McCann's students (7.5%) $\chi^2(1, N = 800) = 11.77, p = .001, \Phi_{Cramer} = .12$. We also found that a higher proportion of our students wanted a teacher that set a fun tone (9.1%) compared to Perlman and McCann's study (4.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 800) = 6.052, p = .004, \Phi_{Cramer} = .10$.

When differences in pet peeves were compared between our study and the Perlman and McCann study we found that more students (15.2%) listed icebreakers as a pet peeve than in the Perlman and McCann students (9.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 800) = 5.468, p = .019, \Phi_{Cramer} = .08$. More students listed being uncaring (17.8%) as a pet peeve compared to the Perlman and McCann's students (6.8%) $\chi^2(1, N = 800) = 21.968, p = .001, \Phi_{Cramer} = .16$. It was also found that significantly more of our students listed poor teaching (9.1%) than the original study (4.9%) $\chi^2(1, N = 800) = 5.071, p = .024, \Phi_{Cramer} = .08$. None of the students in our sample listed meeting for the whole hour as a pet peeve compared to 14.7% of the Perlman and McCann sample. However, an analysis into the reliability of this difference cannot be calculated because it violates the percent in cell assumption for Chi-Squared analyses. Our sample and the original students in the Perlman and McCann sample did not significantly differ in any other categories.

DISCUSSION

Generally, our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann's study

(1999). In both studies, students are most concerned with orienting to the course, including wanting a general overview, details about the exams, assignments and grading, and learning about the instructor and their teaching style. Our findings also fit well with the factors identified by Bassett and Nix (2011) stating that students are most concerned with how to do well in a course and Henslee et al. (2006) finding that students were most interested in class structure and required classwork such as learning the professor's grading standards and the amount of work that will be required in the course. In addition, when exceptional teachers were interviewed about best first-day practices, they identified four themes: (a) communicating course expectations, (b) information on structure and content delivery, (c) procedural details like attendance, and (d) personal information about the professor or other students (Iannarelli, Bardsley, & Foote, 2010). Therefore, the main concerns of students at a small private historically Black university are largely consistent with findings from large and small public institutions.

However, our results diverge from the original study in some important ways. In terms of student preferences on the first day of class, we found that significantly more of our students wanted a teacher who set a fun tone. The category 'a fun tone' originally termed by Perlman and McCann (1999) included responses from students about a classroom environment or teacher on the first day that was interesting, enjoyable, fun, exciting, or enthusiastic. Research has shown that enthusiasm is connected with classroom satisfaction, motivation, and interest (Sass, 1989). Sass asked students to list specific aspects of a recent class that was motivating and one that was not motivating. Students identified instructor enthusiasm as the most important factor in student motivation. Research on student interest has also connected instructor enthusiasm with positive student outcomes. Kim and Schallert (2014) found that instructor and peer enthusiasm was associated with two types of situational interest, catch (initial interest in the topic) and hold interest (sustained attention to the topic). They also measured the relationship between first-day and end-of-the-semester interest ratings and found that instructor enthusiasm was associated with both, suggesting that enthusiasm at a first class meeting may have implications for student interest throughout the semester. Therefore, students in our study may be aware that an enthusiastic (or 'fun') instructor makes class more interesting. In addition, research on the millennial generation indicates that they are easily bored, want variety, are self-directed, and crave interaction (Oblinger, 2003; Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2006). The significant increase in listing an interesting, enjoyable, fun, exciting, or enthusiastic professor may have captured this shift from more traditional students measured in the Perlman and McCann study (1999). Finally, the difference may highlight a preference or expectation of students who attend private institutions where faculty are more likely to value enriching educational experiences (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

When we compared the two studies on pet peeves, we found that the top two pet peeves were the same: poor use of class time and beginning course content. The third most common pet peeve in the Perlman and McCann (1999) study was general overview¹.

¹One possible reason that general overview is listed as the top suggestion for things that work well, and is ranked third for pet peeves may lay in how the general overview is presented. Instructors recognized for outstanding teaching were interviewed for best and worst first day practices and they warned against handing out the syllabus without discussion (Iannarelli et al., 2010). Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) offers the similar advice stating that providing clear and straightforward information about the expectations in a course can decrease students anxiety and increase positive feeling about the course. Students in the original study may be listing syllabus under pet peeve, referring to situations when the information is not adequately introduced.

In our sample, an uncaring or intimidating instructor ranked the third most common pet peeve. In addition, the proportion of students who listed uncaring or intimidating was significantly higher in our sample than in the original study. As mentioned in the introduction, students who attend Historically Black College or University (HBCU's) (76% African American) do so in part because they believe being in a predominantly Black community will afford them the support and help they need to succeed (Hammer, 2011). Therefore, our divergent findings may be highlighting a preference for caring helpful professors at HBCU's.

We also found that first and second year students listed an uncaring professor as a pet peeve significantly more than third and fourth year students and that third and fourth year students listed poor use of class time more frequently than first and second year students. The difference in preferences by class likely reflects the different needs of upper- and under-class students. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of proximal development highlights the importance of providing students with scaffolding (enough information) to solve the problem. As students develop they need less and less scaffolding and can rely more heavily on their own skills to acquire, and synthesize information. Applyby (2007) adapted Vygotsky's theory to reflect stages of development in psychology college students. What she explains is that early in the process the instructor is the main source of information and students are mastering listening, and prioritizing the importance of information. As students progress, the main source of information are primary sources and the goal of the instructor has shifted to help the student assess the quality of the article. Therefore, having a caring instructor may be more critical in the early years of college when the instructor is the main source of information, and making good use of class time might be more important at later stages in college because students are relying on their skills and primary sources for knowledge.

Finally, significantly more of our students listed icebreakers and poor teaching as pet peeves than students in the original study. Opinions on icebreakers are polarized, some suggest it is a worthwhile practice that students enjoy (Lucas, 2006; Royse, 2001) and others indicate icebreakers are not preferable (Henslee et al., 2006). Perlman and McCann themselves found that underclassman liked icebreakers but upperclassman did not (1999). Other research has indicated that it really depends what type of icebreaker you use. Case, Bartsch, McEnery, Hall, Hermann, and Foster (2008) found that students enjoy the reciprocal interview approach and suggest it may be a good replacement for icebreakers. In the reciprocal interview approach the instructor interviews the students and then the students interview the instructor, mostly on topics related to the class like quizzes and grading policies. The reciprocal interview approach is a tailored way to provide information about how to do well in the class. End-of-the-semester ratings for professors who used the reciprocal interview approach were higher than professors who used traditional icebreakers.

In sum, like the Perlman and McCann (1999) sample, students from a small private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) want to orient to the course with a general overview,

details about the exams, assignments and grading, and learning about the instructors, and their teaching style. Students dislike poor use of class time (particularly upper class students), and beginning course content. In addition students from a small private HBCU dislike uncaring professors more than the original sample (particularly for underclass students) and they prefer professors who set a fun tone. Further research is needed to understand if these differential preferences are the result of a self-selecting bias for small private universities, HBCU's, or both. It is also possible that the differences we are seeing reflect a generational and not institutional difference in first day preferences. An investigation directly comparing a large public university like the one used in Perlman and McCann's original study, to a private college and a HBCU would help to disambiguate institutional and generational shifts in first day preferences.

This paper furthers our understanding of student's first day preferences in a western context, where learning goals are to understand and think critically about information. It is expected that preferences would shift in cultures with different learning goals. For example, Chinese students who value learning as a means of self-development and social approval may be less concerned with a classroom environment or professor who is perceived as fun. Aligning cultural learning goals with classroom preferences is an important next step to understanding first day preferences. Finally, the long term effects of first day preferences on grades, motivation, and end of the semester ratings warrants investigation.

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