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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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Cover Page Footnote
The researchers would like to acknowledge the contributions of Annette Iskra for her help collecting data.
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 & Copher, 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 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
In a second, more recent study on students’ first-day preferences, Hennessy et al. (2006) replicated Perlman and McCann’s original study and extended their work by added 5 additional open-ended questions. The total sample consisted of 146 psychology students enrolled in introduction to psychology courses responded to seven open-ended questions assessing overall rating of the first day, satisfaction with the instructor, and relationship 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 teaching preferences. 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, 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 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 on the personal and social 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, and that the professor be on time. Students who attend public universities.

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**METHOD**

**Participants**

The department of psychology at a private historically Black liberal arts college collected data from students on the first day of class. 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**

The 2 independent raters student responses organized into the same categories deemed important to the first day of class by Perlman & 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Works Well</th>
<th>Works Poorly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General overview, syllabus, course content and nature, course expectations, credit information</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory self (background, teaching style) to students</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First day content is put in context and understandable without having read an assignment</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes why students should take the course and how they may profit from it</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets tone of being accessible, supportive, approachable, and friendly</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets tone of being accessible, supportive, approachable, and friendly</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans full hour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets relaxed, comfortable tone</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets a fun tone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning course content (lectures)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor use of class time (non-credit related, information, syllabus, unorganized)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor, unorganized, misleading, no information</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor teaching (instructor nervous, class style, to students)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating Chart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher late or absent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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 as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%)(X²(1,N = 230) = 6.547, p = .01). The type of university may influence student teaching preferences. 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.

**Institutional Differences.** A 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%) (X²(1,N = 230) = 5.647, p = .01). We also found that underclass students listed uncaring (32%) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) (X²(1,N = 230) = 6.547, p = .01).

**DISCUSSION**

Generally, our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann’s study. Our findings differ from previous studies in that the number of students listed poor teaching (instructor nervous, class style, to students) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) than the original study (4.9%) (X²(1,N = 800) = 21.968, p < .001, Φ = .13). The number of students did not change between our study and the Perlman and McCann study we found that significantly more of our students listed poor teaching (instructor nervous, class style, to students) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) than the original study (4.9%) (X²(1,N = 800) = 21.968, p < .001, Φ = .13). The number of students did not change between our study and the Perlman and McCann study we found that significantly more of our students listed poor teaching (instructor nervous, class style, to students) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) than the original study (4.9%) (X²(1,N = 800) = 21.968, p < .001, Φ = .13). The number of students did not change between the two studies. There were significant differences between upper- and lower-class students on what they thought worked well on the first day of class. Our (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%) (X²(1,N = 230) = 5.647, p = .01). 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 study (9.5%) (X²(1,N = 800) = 5.647, p = .019, Φ = .08). More students listed being uncaring (17.8%) as a pet peeve compared to the Perlman and McCann’s students (6.8%) (X²(1,N = 800) = 21.968, p < .001, Φ = .16). It was also found that more students, predominantly Black, students rated the reliability of this difference cannot be calculated because it violates the percent in cell assumption for Chi-Squared analyses. Our study’s findings are similar to previous research.

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In our sample, an uncaring or intimidating instructor ranked the third most common pet peeve. In addition, the proportion of students who feel that an instructor is uncaring or intimidating is significantly higher in our sample than in the original study. As mentioned in the introduction, students who attend Historically Black College or University (HBCUs) (76% African American) do so in part because they prefer the smaller class size, more individualized attention, and required coursework such as learning the professor's grading standards and the amount of work that will be required in the course. Both of these factors were discussed in the interviews 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 touches that increase student retention (Tannarelli, Bardiley, & Foose, 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 to meet their instructor on the first day. The category ‘a fun tone’ originally defined 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 motivating aspect of the classroom experience. On the other hand, student interest has also connected instructor enthusiasm with positive student outcomes. Kim and Schallert (2014) found that students who felt that their professor really cared about them or had high personal expectations for students have a higher level of 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 students 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 resource of information, and making good use of class time might be more important at later stages in college because students are not only acquiring but also synthesizing information. 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 way to get to know students and to start the semester off on the right foot. Others argue it is a waste of time and that they do not want to share personal information. Some students and others indicate icebreakers are not preferable (Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman and McCann, 2003). 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 teaching as a pet peeve more frequently than first 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. Appleby (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 learning 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 students 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 resource of information, and making good use of class time might be more important at later stages in college because students are not only acquiring but also synthesizing information.

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