

# What Do Students Want?

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What makes a course excellent and what makes a teacher excellent? The assessment of teaching is derived from numerous sources: peer assessment of teaching, peer assessment of course materials, self-analysis, and student evaluations. Faculty members and administrators often discount the significance of the latter methodology, course evaluations, and often attribute the outcomes to the faculty member's ability to tell jokes and garner popularity, or to the students' inability to appreciate what is being taught. Discounting this input creates a gap in determining what contributes to excellence in teaching.

The extant literature suggests that students' evaluations of the effectiveness of a teacher are moderately correlated with measures of student learning and achievement (Davis, 1993). Lowman (1984, p. 9) points out that the two outstanding factors contributing to student ratings are clarity of presentation and "quality of interpersonal relationships between instructors and students." Related to the issue of clarity of information is the ability of the instructor to apply concepts to differing contexts.

In an effort to ascertain what students at KSU regard as components to excellence in teaching, a non-random survey was conducted Winter quarter. Thirty junior and senior level students, representing a mixture of ages, sex, and majors, were asked to recall their best and worst university teachers. They were then told to indicate why they rated the teacher or teachers as they did. Students, who were assured of anonymity, were also told not to name the teachers. Originally a focus group was conducted, but the writer was concerned that this methodology was too passive. Some students would present their ideas and others concurred. The survey forced students to develop their own ideas about effective teaching.

What characterizes an excellent teacher to students at KSU? The primary factor cited by twenty-five students is the instructor's involvement with students. Students clarified this by stating that classroom discussion that challenges them and involves them in dialogue increases their desire to learn. The second factor cited is the instructor's ability to relate personal

and professional experiences, and "current events" into the curriculum. What characteristics are seen in faculty members who are not viewed as effective? The majority of the respondents stated that the instructor was distant from the students. These instructors were described as rigid and unwilling to respond to students' questions. Students indicated that they felt "stupid" because they needed clarification or were unable to grasp the information presented to them. The other responses fall into the following categories: the lectures were delivered in a monotonous voice, no "real world" experiences were used for clarifying concepts, no class discussion was incorporated into the lecture, the grading was rigid or not based on lectures, the individual simply didn't teach well (showed videos for every class) or was disorganized. These findings are similar to those found in the literature.

Numerous campus surveys have been conducted by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning asking chairpersons and faculty members what workshops they want, but they are not similar to what students indicate is needed for excellence in teaching. Understandably, faculty today are interested in workshops that focus on technology. Students want workshops that focus on discussion and involvement with instructors. The two focuses are ultimately related. Electronic classrooms are more successful when there is greater student participation (Hansen, 1991). Faculty members must be able to engage students in exchanges, whether in face-to-face situations or electronically, if they are to be viewed as effective.

How do we become more effective as teachers? We can attend conferences and workshops, and we can watch and talk to our colleagues who are known as excellent teachers. We can also listen to our students. Perhaps it is time for many of us to try out new approaches to teaching. The articles in this edition of *Reaching Through Teaching* address varied ways of engaging students in the learning process. The authors, many of whom are Regents' Distinguished Professors of Teaching and Learning, discuss how they interact with students and how they make concepts and theories come alive for them.

## REFERENCES:

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