

# SETTING CLEAR & MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

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**Abstract:** Reports on the expectations that affect learning environments. Importance and kinds of expectations; Institutional expectations; Development of statements of values.

## **Few faculty actually appreciate the role that explicit expectations play in creating relationships that make possible a positive learning environment**

THE MOST RECENT STATEMENT on Liberal Learning of the Board of Directors of AAC&U (Liberal Education, 85: 2, Spring 1999) embodies a grand vision of learning that "prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives." Liberal education requires "that we cultivate a respect for truth..., and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities." Such learning should be centered in the "ability to think, to learn, and to express oneself both rigorously and creatively, the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context, the commitment to live in society, and the yearning for truth."

Far more than the acquisition of information, the kind of learning it calls us to can best occur in a context that reflects such characteristics as responsibility, respect, and connections with others. For faculty, it requires a concern about the setting, the environment, the "culture" of the classroom, laboratory, or other learning situation, and the faculty-student relationship is of central importance in determining this culture. These issues need to become more explicit in faculty thinking as they plan courses they hope will lead to liberal learning.

Any discussion of pedagogical techniques is secondary to a prior and more important question, namely, what kind of relationship between students and faculty creates an effective classroom or laboratory environment for liberal learning? If you ask students about effective teachers, they typically talk about faculty who "connect" with them. Students are quick to recognize teachers who demonstrate this characteristic by establishing a relationship with the class, and students seem to establish special rapport with them. If pressed, they might describe such a teacher as one who "cares about me as a person" and "is enthusiastic about her subject and can demonstrate its relevance to my life." But, they might not be able to be more explicit about the basic requirements for an effective student-faculty relationship.

The benefits of a healthy students-faculty relationship can be observed in numerous ways. Recent research data demonstrate that a student's decision to continue at an institution depends primarily on whether the student has developed within the first few weeks of college a "personal relationship" with a faculty member. In addition to increased retention rates, faculty satisfaction and student learning outcomes are positively affected by these relationships.

### **Importance and kinds of expectations**

At the beginning of any such relationship, clear and mutual expectations must be set out. Moreover, when expectations are not in place, misunderstandings frequently arise, establishing a relationship is problematical, and, in the case of a student-faculty relationship, achieving an ideal learning environment is greatly jeopardized. In general, expectations influence behavior, thereby affecting classroom behavior.

Conversely, the failure to set out these expectations early creates a number of problems for students, faculty, and their institutions. Karen Schilling (1998) has noted, for example, that in the absence of "clear and repeated statements of its [the university's] expectations" concerning the amount of academic work students should expect to do in a class, students will rely on their prior experiences from high school. "On many campuses, faculty claim on student time has been reduced to a few hours a week," says Schilling, reflecting the findings of HERI's annual survey of freshmen. In 1987, 44 percent of students surveyed reported spending six or more hours per week in high school studying or doing homework; by 1998, that percentage had dropped to 32.9. If expectations are not changed as these students move to higher education, high school patterns persist. Schilling goes on to suggest that "those programs that have been most successful in creating cultures of achievement are clear and persistent in developing messages about what students are expected to do and in providing support for their engagement in those activities."

An analagous situation seems to apply to academic dishonesty. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 22, 1999), Duke University Professor Gary A. Ybarra noted that cheating has declined dramatically since he started handing out a lengthy warning about

cheating on the first day of the semester and engaging the class in discussion each week on issues of academic dishonesty. On the level of academic integrity, as well as in the time spent on academic work, clear and explicit expectations--or their lack--make a difference.

Explicit expectations are important in gaining student acceptance not only of doing more work but also of doing academic work of a different kind and about making students comfortable with new pedagogical styles. Eric Mazur (1997), who teaches introductory physics in large sections, has adopted an active learning format in his classes, eschewing the standard lecture mode. He writes: "Students are not likely to accept a change in lecture format with open arms. They are used to traditional lectures and will doubt the new format will help them achieve more (i.e., obtain a higher grade in the course). Since full student collaboration is essential to the success of the Peer Instruction method, it is ... very important to make sure the students' expectations conform better to what will actually happen in class." He goes on to describe how, at the beginning of the course, he involves students in understanding and accepting his expectations.

By similar means, could faculty lessen classroom disruptions? Faculty bemoan student behaviors that interrupt lectures, annoy other students, and distract faculty--and can be dangerous. Such classroom behaviors include sleeping, talking to neighbors, reading newspapers, and even shining laser pointers at the instructor. For instance, several students in an upper level course at a state university repeatedly arrived at lecture ten to fifteen minutes late and walked across the front of the class to find a chair. The professor was not amused, to put it mildly. On another campus, a large lecture section was often disturbed by the talking among a small group of students; the instructor repeatedly asked them to be quiet, and received comments on the student class evaluations such as, "It is not your job to tell us to be quiet. It is your job to lecture." These behaviors convince us of the need for clearly established and repeated mutual expectations with the potential for broadly influencing student behavior--and faculty as well.

### **Implementation**

Few faculty actually appreciate the role that explicit expectations play in creating relationships that make possible a positive learning environment. Few faculty take time to consider what should be stated and may not understand what steps are needed to motivate students to buy into such expectations. Even fewer faculty would acknowledge the need for such expectations to be mutual. Yet, we believe that the two issues--how to arrive at and implement such expectations and why they should be mutual, rather than one-way--are closely related.

One model of how to develop such expectations arose from an invitation to Professor Sufka to address a class of students enrolled in a traditional first-year experience course. His account is vivid:

Last term, a colleague from the division of student life asked me to guest lecture to her class on the topic of faculty expectations of students. As I assembled my list of expectations, I began to consider what a list of students' expectations of faculty might include. This musing led me to three questions: Would student expectations of a faculty be reasonable in light of university expectations of faculty? Would students and faculty expectations yield a set of common values? Would students ultimately embrace or "buy into" my own expectations of students? Answers to these questions clearly required input from my colleague's students.

In class that day I divided the students into small groups of four to five students per group. Each group was to take the role either of the university, the faculty, or the student, and to develop a set of expectations ranked by level of importance. As we worked our way from group to group, it became increasingly clear that thoughtful students, no matter which role they played, could come up with a set of reasonable and common expectations. For example, "students" thought faculty should be "up to date" in their field of specialty, use "effective teaching strategies" in the classroom or laboratory, be "fair" in writing exams and assigning grades, and be "available" to students outside the classroom. "Faculty" thought students should be "prepared" for class lectures and exams, become "active participants" in their education, and "seek out faculty" when they encounter difficulty with course material. At the end of the exercise I found these and other expectations to essentially center on four themes: open communication, mutual respect, integrity, and achievement. Moreover, I found students willing to "buy into" these expectations, likely because of the collaborative nature of the exercise.

In my own courses the following semester, I devoted a portion of the first class meetings to address the topic of mutual expectations. These classes included a lower division lecture course with 175 students, an upper division lecture course with forty-five students, and an upper division laboratory course with eight students. In each class, students were quite willing to discuss and provide examples for each of the mutual expectations of respect, open communication, integrity, and achievement. Students were pleased to know that I, too, was committed to these reasonable expectations. To date, student responses... have been quite favorable. I assist more students during office hours, receive more e-mail messages concerning course material, and have encountered seemingly few classroom disruptions. I have also noted that students have taken greater ownership in their courses as measured by their likelihood to take some personal responsibility for exam performance instead of attributing the blame elsewhere.

### **Institutional expectations**

Our beliefs about setting clear and mutual expectations to influence classroom behavior parallel the important work of the Policy Advisory Task Force of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Chaired by Thomas Miller of Canisius College,

the task force sought to clarify "the nature of the relationship between institutions and students to enhance student and institutional productivity." The outcome of this effort, found in the 1994 NASPA publication titled *Reasonable Expectations*, stressed the importance of the nature and quality of student-faculty relations in a student's academic achievement and in personal development through setting clear and mutual expectations. An excellent resource, it identifies five focal areas in which institutions and students should set mutual expectations (i.e., teaching and learning, the curriculum, institutional integrity, quality of institutional life, and educational services), offers "a pair of complementary propositions expressing the reciprocal expectations of institutions and students," and provides reflective questions to determine whether these expectations are being met.

The report's emphasis on the institutional setting is appropriate. While an individual faculty member can establish a collaborative process in an individual class, the institutional context will either reinforce and encourage that process or marginalize and devalue it. Since the institution hires and inculcates faculty and admits and orients students in the first place, it is only institutional policies and processes that can ensure that this kind of expectation setting is sustained; for instance, to re-examine the common policy requiring that a syllabus and a basis-for-grades statement be distributed to students in advance. It would be a good start if that policy were broadened to include discussion of mutual classroom expectations. But an institution can go far beyond that step in influencing healthier relationships between faculty and students.

### **Statements of values**

One interesting initiative in recent years has been the development of institutional statements of values. The names of these documents vary: compacts, creeds, values, or principles. The content varies as well, though there are many common themes. Such statements have been adopted in institutions of varying types, including the University of South Carolina, Olivet College, the University of Pittsburgh, Syracuse University, and the University of Akron, to name a few. Sometimes the intended audience is the student body, but, frequently, the statements apply to the entire community: faculty, staff, and students. Used in the interviewing and hiring of faculty, they enable potential faculty to understand the nature of the community they might be joining. They can be sent to prospective students and incorporated centrally into orientation programs for new students, so that even before students enroll, they have some understanding of the context of the community they are about to join.

At the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU), for example, a values statement was completed in 1998 by a task force of faculty, staff, and students appointed by the chancellor, on which Professor George served. It lays out values of respect, responsibility, discovery, and excellence that are intended to be internalized by all members of the community. These values are being communicated to potential MU faculty, made part of the orientation of new

students, and incorporated into university policies and course syllabi. They are entirely compatible with the aims of liberal learning described earlier.

Having a campus framework such as institutional values statements represent is certainly not essential for development of explicit expectations in an individual class. But, if the campus has helped to create a receptive climate for respectful discussion of expectations through adopting such a values statement--and thus taking it seriously--it seems more likely that clear, explicit, mutually arrived-at understandings about individual classes will emerge.

Of course, the adoption of values statements is no panacea. To the extent that they become part of the fabric of community life, classrooms and laboratories can be places of healthier relationships, greater student learning, and increased faculty satisfaction. Even in the absence of such an institutional framework, individual faculty could--and should--do what they can to encourage the development of mutual, explicit expectations that support liberal learning in every class.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): University of Missouri-Columbia

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