January 2017

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

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Recommended Citation
Eskine, Katherine E. and Hammer, Elizabeth Yost (2017) "Students’ Perspectives on the First Day of Class: A Replication,"  
International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110105
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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

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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(Received 02 November 2015; Accepted 19 August 2016)

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 (Berbéroglu & 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 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. Amjadi 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
In a second, more recent study on students’ first-day preferences, Henslee et al. (2006) replicated Perlman and McCann’s (1999) original study and extended their work by adding 5 additional open-ended questions and 8 survey items to the original 14. Although the sample of psychology students enrolled in introduction to psychology courses responded to seven open-ended questions assessing overall rating of the first class meeting, and 28 survey items assessing specific first-day activities, 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 both the Perlman and McCann’s (1999) study focusing on large public universities and the Henslee et al. study on private institutions, the authors did not report ethnic information on their students.

A final study on first-day practices addressed some, but not all, of the first-day variables. 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 reduced the 18 variables to 5 factors listed in order of importance: course difficulty, professional information, course content, and interactions.

These findings are particularly interesting when coupled with the finding that feeling like one does not belong for ethnic minority students is an important factor in the dropping out of students at an educational institution (Swick, 2003). Therefore the relationship between teachers and students is particularly important for minority students.

Furthermore, the type of university may influence student first-day preferences. Research on the impact of faculty and course difficulty 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 the enrichment of educational experiences. (Johnson et al., 1998; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Taken together this research suggests a need for 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 given 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 historically Black college and predicted that students would be interested in learning about the overall 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, tone that is likely to be more engaging, and clear and logical style to students. 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 privately historically Black liberal arts college collected data from students on the first day of the Spring 2013 semester. The ethical implications of the study were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board. Six faculty members in the department collected data from a total of 230 students attending an HBCU because they are more likely to receive the attention and support necessary for success (Hammer, 2011). Specifically, survey data were collected from predominantly white students who responded to seven open-ended questions and interactions with teachers and peers, sense of belonging, and student success (Messioe, Sewerians, & Born, 2010). The model that best explained the variance among students who worked together to that day and 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 blank card. 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). On Side B list 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 faculty doing 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

Two independent researchers responded into the same categories deemed important to the first day ofPerlman 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Works Well</th>
<th>Pet Peeve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General overview, syllabus, course content, and requirements, expectations</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of self (background, teaching style) to students</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First day content is put in context and understandable</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes why students should take the course and how they may profit from it</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets tone of being accessible, supportive</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitutes</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss class</td>
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</table>

**What works well.** Students preferred a general overview of the course or syllabus (91.5%). They wanted teachers to specify different categories of textbook and syllabus (91.5%). The explanation background and teaching style was listed as useful first-class practice by 23.9% of students. Finally, students listed that teachers who set a tone that was fun (9.1%) acceptable, approachable (6.5%), and relaxed and comfortable (3.5%), worked well.

**Pet Peeves.** Student pet peeves on the first day of class included poor use of class time (31.2%), beginning with course content (23.9%), 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 (underclass) 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. Of our (listed, unlisted) X 2 (underclass, upperclass) 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 underclass students (28%) X2 (1, N = 230) = 6.547, p = .01, Φ = .17. We also found that underclass students listed uncaring (32%) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) X2 (1, N = 230) = 5.619, p = .02, Φ = .16.

**Institutional Differences.** A 2 (listed, unlisted) X 2 (Perlman & McCann, Xavier) Chi-squared analysis was also calculated to determine differences between Perlman and McCann's study and our study. To do this 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 there was 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 study. 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%) X2 (1, N = 230) = 6.052, p = .044, Φ = .10.

When differences in pet peeves were compared between our study and the Perlman and McCann study we found that students (12.5%) listed icebreakers as a pet peeve than Perlman and McCann students (9.5%), X2 (1, N = 230) = 5.468, p = .019, Φ = .08. More students listed being uncaring (17.8%) as a pet peeve compared to the Perlman and McCann’s students (8.7%) X2 (1, N = 230) = 9.040, p = .003, Φ = .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%) X2 (1, N = 230) = 6.052, p = .044, Φ = .10.

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DISCUSSION

Generally, our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann’s study (2001), but are most often aligned with the findings of the best class. We observed students are most interested in the course content, with the majority of the students selecting "the course content" as the second 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 literature review, asking students to rank their levels grading standards and the amount of work that will be required in the course. In addition, when exceptional students were interviewed about the course content, they identified four themes: (a) a lack of feedback, (b) lack of instructor support and content delivery, (c) procedural details like attendance, and (d) personal information about the professor or other students. The main concern 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 of class that was interesting, enjoyable, fun, exciting, or enthusiastic. Research has shown that enthusiasm is connected with classroom satisfaction, motivation, and interest (Sass, 1999). Sass asked students to list things that was important to them and one thing that was not motivating. Students identified instructor enthusiasm as the most important factor in student motivation. Research on student interest and 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 (sustained attention to the topic). They also measured the relationship between first 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, instructors in our study can be aware that an enthusiastic (or fun) instructor makes class more interesting. In addition, research on the relationship between enthusiasm and instruction indicates that they are easily bored, want
time (particularly upper class students), and beginning course content. Therefore, our divergent findings may be reflecting a preference for caring helpful professors at HBCUs.

We also found that first and second year students listed an uncaring, uncommunicating, and not knowing the subject two of the most important factors that explained those factors. Prensky’s (2001) 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 he explains is that early in the process the instructor is the main source of information and students are mastering, first line of sight and prioritizing the importance of information. As students progress, the main source of information is primary sources and the goal of the instruction is helping the student see 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 the instructor 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 warrant investigation.

REFERENCES


