To push or pander: current students and professor behaviors they desire

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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in college student populations suggest potential value in assessing current students in terms of what they desire from their professors. A list of professor behaviors was examined, drawing from previous literature. Six hundred and sixty undergraduate business students across three universities rated their desires for various professor behaviors. Most highly desired behaviors include providing clear presentations/explanations and being enthusiastic/entertaining. The least desired behaviors include being intellectually challenging and providing feedback beyond class performance needs. Compared to students with low mastery learning orientation, students with high mastery learning orientation had a stronger desire for being intellectually challenged and had less need for professors who set clear expectations. Compared to students taking conceptual (qualitative) courses, students taking quantitative courses had a stronger desire to receive help on class-related items and had less need for professors who possess high expertise. Conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and future research ideas are also presented.

Keywords: student desires, professor behaviors, mastery learning orientation

INTRODUCTION

A prestigious university recently fired a professor after more than 80 students in his course petitioned university officials "to realize that a class with such a high percentage of withdrawals and low grades has failed to make students' learning and wellbeing a priority". Meanwhile, the professor stated he was observing more students skipping live and recorded lectures, and fewer students visiting office hours. He also attributed declining student performance to changes lingering from students' COVID-19 experiences (Marcos, 2022).

The situation described above reflects educators' concerns about students' study habits and what students want from their professors. To an extent, professors must achieve some balance between exerting efforts to push students to excel, and efforts to provide an educational experience that students wish to receive. A concern lies in the potential opposing nature of these two efforts. Educators have had this concern for many years (e.g., Detchen, 1940). The concern illustrates the practical challenge to balance educational "push" with efforts that unfortunately seem like "pandering" to students' wishes. Given this concern, some value exists in periodically assessing students' desired support from their professors. If this desired support changes, then professors may need to adjust practices to maintain a 'push versus pander' balance, either adjusting practices in how professors explain their reasons for maintaining high efforts to push their students to excel or adjusting actual pedagogy practices. Education researchers have noted such changes in desired support have recently occurred for different reasons (Rist, 2022). For example, in addition to changes and challenges associated with student desire for online education, recent declining enrollments have led some universities to admit less academically prepared students and increase the priority on student retention (Paterson and Guerrero, 2023). The result may be an increasing segment of upper-level students who want academically easier experiences. These current challenges have also led some universities to hire a greater percentage of less expensive instructors who are not on a tenure track, and who thus may feel more pressure to accede to student wishes, even if those wishes lean toward having a less rigorous educational experience.

MASTERY LEARNING ORIENTATION AND COURSE TYPE

A quest to understand student desires should acknowledge that students vary in terms of what they want from professors. Two main factors that relate to this student variation are the student learning orientation and the types of coursework students pursue.

With respect to learning orientation, Tucker et al. (2024) studied business students and examined student mindsets. One mindset they focused on was a "closed versus open" mindset, where the open mindset includes a learning goal of continuous curiosity and pursuit of understanding. This open mindset reflects a mastery orientation in learning, which has been connected to students desire for more course rigor (Ames, 1995). That is, highly mastery-oriented students generally try to strongly understand the materials in their courses, whereas less mastery-oriented students seek mainly to perform sufficiently well on exams and other graded course elements, regardless of truly understanding the materials (Ross et al., 2021). Mastery orientation may play a role in shaping what students want from professors because studies have found that students with different levels of mastery orientation use different strategies when progressing through courses. For example, as students' mastery orientations become higher, they become more likely to seek challenging tasks from professors, become more likely to ask

questions that require greater knowledge from professors, and have higher beliefs that their learning efforts will lead to later successes (Ames and Archer, 1988).

With respect to the types of coursework students take, Viktor et al. (2024) recently studied global student evaluations of teaching (i.e., SET scores) and found that average student evaluations of teaching were slightly lower for students pursuing majors that are more quantitative (versus qualitative) in nature. The divide between quantitative and qualitative courses has received much attention. For example, some studies have examined math anxiety among college students. These studies have found that student study habits diminish as their math-related fears increase, specifically spending less time studying and having lower tendencies to complete practice problems (Jenifer et al., 2022). This type of anxiety poses problems for quantitative courses yet seems much less prevalent (or at least different) when looking at qualitative courses. As a result, students may seek more help and assurance from professors who teach quantitative (versus qualitative) courses. On the other hand, anxious students could disengage from their studies and unfortunately seek less help from their professors. In either case, a focus on quantitative versus qualitative coursework is useful for this study because the 'math readiness' of incoming college students has recently declined (Molnár and Zoltán, 2023). Further, while many types of courses could be compared, the quantitative/quantitative distinction applies broadly across many college programs and has long interested professors who seek to tailor their classroom practices to help students succeed (e.g., Guidry, 2013).

STUDY OBJECTIVES

Given the above, this exploratory study has three objectives:

1. Assess current student desires for specific professor behaviors.
2. Determine whether desired professor behaviors vary across learning orientations.
3. Determine whether desired professor behaviors vary across coursework that is more quantitative (versus qualitative) in nature.

While pursuing the above three objectives, the scope of this study was delimited in two ways to help remove confounds.

First, the study focused on business students taking required introductory courses that are more quantitative versus qualitative. The benefit to this business-student delimitation is that both courses are required for all business majors. Thus, quantitative and qualitative courses are taken by the same population of students. If these students seek some professor behaviors when enrolled in a quantitative course yet seek other professor behaviors when enrolled in a qualitative course, then the difference is likely due to the nature of the coursework, rather than the student. Thus, a potential confusion is removed by focusing on courses taken by the same population of students.

Second, the study focused solely on courses taught in person. While online course environments may be equally valuable to examine, they appear to have a myriad of differences. For example, Hamlin and Barney (2022) connect post-COVID-19 online environments to differences in study habits, perceptions of instruction quality, and ability to communicate with fellow students. Also, in the authors' experiences, some professor behaviors occur differently when teaching courses taught in person versus online, such as the interactivity of in-class exercises or discussions. Ultimately, by limiting the scope of this study to one delivery mode (in-

person delivery), the variation of external factors is reduced which could cause added confusion in interpreting results.

PROFESSOR BEHAVIORS

Professor behaviors were identified by drawing from three sources. These include Feldman's (1988) review of instructional qualities as assessed by students and by faculty (drawing from 31 prior studies), Marsh's (1991) examination of how different professor attributes (mainly identified by Feldman) relate to each other, and Senko et al.'s (2012) evaluation of psychology student 'basic versus luxury' preferences for professor behaviors (mainly based on Marsh's work). These prior studies present rationales for focusing on specific behaviors, along with underlying theories. The objective here was not to reexamine those theories but to identify a suitable set of professor behaviors. The definitions and measures of these behaviors vary slightly across the prior studies and below are descriptions of how this study referred to these behaviors.

Professor behavior	Description
Enthusiastic/entertaining	Energetic and positive. Uses humor, anecdotes, and other methods to keep students engaged.
Give advice beyond class	Gives advice that goes beyond the class, such as ideas for job searches, managing college or even post-college life.
Give feedback on class performance	Gives helpful feedback on class exercises, assignments, or exams.
Good at presenting/explaining	Presents material clearly. Gives good examples. Answers questions clearly.
Have reasonable workload	Gives a reasonable amount of workload so students are not overworked.
High expertise	Comments knowledgeably about course topics and how they apply to real world settings.
Intellectually challenging	Encourages rigorous thinking about the material. Pushes students to go beyond the basics.
Interactive	Welcomes class discussion. Encourages students to express their opinions. Invites students to disagree.
Sets clear expectations	Is clear about what students must do to succeed in the course, and what materials are most important to study.
Warm/compassionate	Is friendly toward individual students. Easy to approach. Shows compassion and seems caring.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

IRB approvals were obtained and then survey data were collected from 660 undergraduate students enrolled in either an in-person introductory Finance class (sub-sample 1) or in an in-person introductory Marketing class (sub-sample 2) across three mid-size public universities in the United States. The participating introductory finance class is largely quantitative in nature, and the introductory marketing class is largely conceptual (qualitative) in nature. The majority of student respondents, 55 percent, were juniors, approximately 17 percent were seniors and approximately 27 percent were sophomores or freshmen. Almost all, 97 percent, were traditional, full-time students. For the procedure, students used a constant-sum scale to express their desire for the ten professor behaviors presented above. Specifically, they were told to purchase professor behaviors, using whole dollar purchases only, spending $0 to a maximum of $10 for each behavior, and spending a total of $20. This monetarization type of constant sum procedure has been used successfully in prior research, for example when studying desired behaviors of potential mates (Li et al., 2002) and when studying educator qualities desired by graduate medical students (Knoster et al., 2021).

Measures

Subjects received professor behavior descriptions above. Learning orientation was measured using a three item, five-point scale adapted from Elliot and Murayama (2008). Items were, “My goal is to learn as much as possible in this class,” “My aim is to completely master the material presented in this class,” and “I am striving to gain as much expertise as I can in this class.” Higher responses on the five-point scale reflect a stronger mastery learning orientation. Using Cronbach alpha, the reliability of this three-item scale among study respondents was 0.802, which exceeds the generally accepted level of 0.70. Subject scores on the three items were averaged. The median average score was 3.67. Subjects’ average scores were then used to divide subjects into low and high mastery orientation groups, compared to the median average score of 3.67. Of the 660 subjects, 136 (20.6%) had a 3.67 score and were excluded from further analysis. The low mastery group then included 277 subjects with scores below the 3.67 median (42.1% of the total sample) and the high mastery group included 247 subjects with scores above the 3.67 median (37.4% of the total sample). Several other covariates were collected.

RESULTS

The study’s first objective was to assess current student desires for specific professor behaviors. Results appear in Table 1 (Appendix). The single most desired behavior is for professors to be good at presenting and explaining, accounting for 17.6% of the constant sum scale values. Being enthusiastic and entertaining is the second most desired behavior, reflecting 14.9% of the scale values. The top five behaviors collectively reflect 68.2% of the student dollar purchase, while the bottom five behaviors collectively reflect 31.8% of the student dollar purchase. Two of the professor behaviors most reflect course rigor. Students want professors to assign ‘reasonable workloads’ (not overworked), with that factor receiving 12.7% of students’

constant sum scale values. In contrast, 'intellectual challenge' (the other rigor behavior) was the second least desired behavior, receiving only 5.6% of students' constant sum scale values.

The study's second objective was to compare students with high versus low mastery learning orientations, to see whether this learning orientation was associated with desired professor behaviors. Results appear in Table 2 (Appendix). Independent samples t-tests were used. Compared to students with a low mastery orientation, students with a high mastery orientation have a greater desire for professors who present intellectual challenge ($p=0.002$). Notice from Table 2, however, that the actual average dollars spent on intellectual challenge by high mastery orientation students was only $1.31. Compared to amounts these high mastery orientation students spent on all ten professor behaviors; intellectual challenge was still the third lowest. Students with high (versus low) mastery orientation also place more priority in having professors with high expertise ($p=0.04$). In terms of low (versus high) mastery orientation students, they place more priority in having professors who present clear expectations ($p=0.01$). Both low mastery and high mastery students place most value in having professors who are 'good at presenting/explaining', and then place second-most value in having professors who are 'enthusiastic and entertaining.'

The study's third objective was to compare students taking quantitative versus qualitative course work, to see whether this coursework dimension was associated with desired professor behaviors. Results appear in Table 3 (Appendix). Independent samples t-tests were used. Across the ten professor behaviors, two differed significantly across quantitative and qualitative coursework. Having professors with high expertise was more desired by students taking qualitative (versus quantitative) coursework, $p=0.006$. And having professors who provide helpful feedback on class performance was more desired by students taking quantitative (versus qualitative) coursework, $p=0.015$. As before, the uniformly most desired behavior was 'good at presenting/explaining,' with 'enthusiastic and entertaining' being the next most highly desired behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study's first conclusion is that current students most highly desire the professor's behaviors of being good at presenting/explaining, and secondly being enthusiastic/entertaining. A professor's strength in presenting/explaining perhaps does not align with delivering either a 'push' or 'pander' experience. However, the enthusiastic/entertaining desired behavior suggests professors may witness student desires that lean more toward the pandering side. Other results also suggest that students desire pandering behaviors, including their relatively high desire for a reasonable (not overwhelming) workload, and their relatively low desire for intellectual challenge and help to address careers or other issues that are beyond class performance.

This study's next conclusions are that some desires for professor behaviors differ across students who have low versus high mastery learning orientation, and when comparing quantitative versus qualitative coursework. High (versus low) mastery-oriented students seem more interested in 'figuring things out for themselves' as evidenced by their lower desire for professors to provide clear expectations. High (versus low) mastery-oriented students also seem more interested in having professors who provide an intellectual challenge and who possess high expertise (although their desire for intellectual challenge is still low, relative to their desire for other professor behaviors). In terms of courses, students taking quantitative coursework more

highly desire professors who give feedback about class performance, perhaps because students are more able to recognize a need for feedback when working on quantitative problems (e.g., they can tell they are stuck and need help). In contrast, students taking qualitative coursework more highly desire professors who have high expertise, perhaps because qualitative coursework more easily leads to a desire for creative applications where professors with high expertise could illustrate how and why theories could be applied in real life.

Ideally, results from this study of current students would be compared to results that reflect students from a time period that was at least pre-COVID-19. The closest comparison available was to Senko et al.'s (2012) study of psychology students. Some findings differ across the current study and the prior study. Particular reasons for why these findings changed are not being asserted, as changes may be driven by changes in students over time, but may simply reflect different student populations studied, or different courses studied. Nevertheless, it may be noteworthy that the most desired professor behavior in the current study was presenting/explaining, whereas professor behavior was the fourth highest desired element in the 2012 study. On the other hand, enthusiastic/entertaining was the most highly desired professor behavior in the 2012 study and almost reached this top level in the current study, being the second-most desired professor behavior. In the 2012 study, professor interactivity was the least desired component, whereas interactivity was closer to the middle of the desired behaviors in the current study. In the current study, intellectual challenge was the second least desired behavior, whereas intellectual challenge was closer to the middle of the desired behaviors in the 2012 study. Given the recent drift toward enrolling less academically prepared students, perhaps it makes sense that students now have a lower desire for intellectual challenge and a higher desire for clear presenting/explaining. This is of course speculative, given the current study differed from the 2012 study in various ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'push versus pander' framing of this study alludes to options professors could pursue when designing and delivering courses. As professors, the authors of this study have a strong bias toward the 'push' side. Yet, variation clearly exists across professors. In addition, university administrators can also impact course design and delivery through decisions about what to fund, and decisions about who to assign to different teaching roles. Thus, the recommendations below may be useful for faculty and administrators.

First, universities should seek engaging ways to encourage students to be more receptive to intellectual challenges and to receive feedback that addresses careers or other issues that lie beyond the classroom. The low desire for intellectual challenge and this type of feedback are not shocking. However, they are certainly disheartening and worth addressing. Perhaps in important consideration is that college students (and many others) often think primarily in the short term. Advantages associated with intellectual challenge and getting a career or other feedback largely accrue in the long term. Perhaps universities could guide students through a 'simulated life path' that helps them be more cognizant of long-term opportunities. In addition, universities could measure student desire for intellectual challenge as a leading key performance indicator, perhaps in a way that is similar to how student engagement is measured through the NSSE survey, for example.

A second recommendation is to consider instances when multiple sections of courses are offered. Where reasonable, separate classes could be developed for students based on their

mastery-orientation. For example, some programs have honors courses that essentially target students who can grow through challenges presented without much guidance, and students who want higher levels of challenge and interactivity. Aside from the honors designation, other opportunities may exist to offer courses for students who are not in an honors program, but who seek a higher level of knowledge and skill development. Further, if some students opt into a course that aligns with lower mastery orientation, those professors could reduce some time they devote to highly challenging materials that students will ultimately not value or pursue (which admittedly is aligned with the 'pander' option).

A third recommendation is to take advantage of the finding that students in quantitative courses more highly desire feedback related to class performance, and that students in qualitative courses more highly desire high expertise. Many quantitative classes are already designed to include practice problems. Perhaps AI tools could be used to tailor these problems, so depending on how well students solve a current problem, they are then steered toward an appropriate next problem. This steering may not even require more time from the professor but could address the student desire for feedback. And for qualitative classes, perhaps case studies or other assignments could be designed in ways that explicitly encourage students to "ask an expert" about how real world organizations use the principles being studied in the assignments.

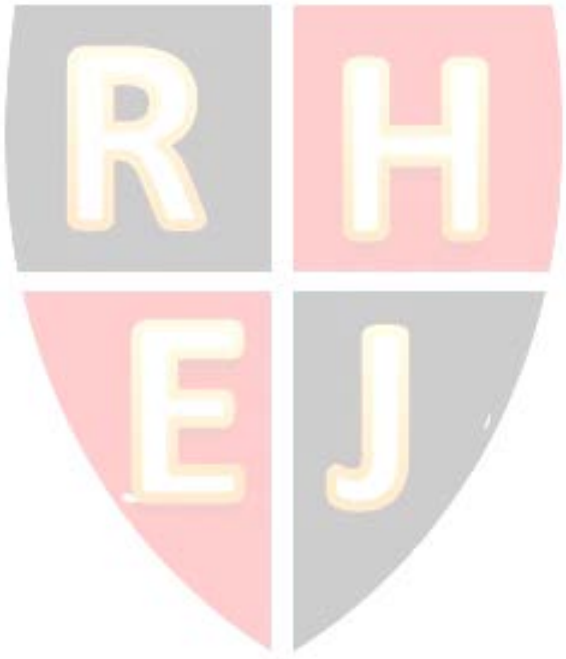
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to understand current students' desires for professor behaviors. A limitation is that the study was designed to generate practical insights for administrators and professors who want to know what current students value in professors. The work was not designed to build new theory. Although extant literature was used that reflects theoretical work, future research must continue to explore and develop these conceptual domains. As an example, consider the 'intellectual challenge' finding. This is among students' least desired behavior and is especially undesired among students with a low mastery learning orientation. Future research could seek to better explain such a low desire for intellectual challenge. After all, subjects in this study were all college students who are spending four (or more) years and a lot of actual (not hypothetical) money to participate in learning environments.

A second limitation of this work is that it purposefully studied in person courses only. This limitation avoids potential confounds associated with studying in person and online courses. Sampling for this study could have included online courses, yet a concern would still exist, which is that professor behaviors are often manifested differently when comparing in person to online courses. Thus, even if this study's sampling included online courses, comparisons between the modes of delivery could still be difficult to make. For example, students might want more interactivity in an in person course or in an online course, and the finding could reflect different expectations across students of how interactivity would be achieved in the course, rather than a true desire for more or less interactivity. Perhaps future researchers could find ways to examine professors' behaviors in ways that allow more even (apples to apples) comparisons across courses with different delivery modes.

A third limitation of this work is that professor attributes are only one aspect of what makes students feel satisfied with a course. College administrators and professors must consider many different issues as they design courses and educational programs. The physical facilities of a building may impact student satisfaction, as could the modality of instruction, the time of day a course is taught, and the size or culture of a class. Even factors as tangential as the availability of

easy parking may impact student satisfaction. Future research should continue to look at a broad set of issues that includes not only the professor but other factors as well, assess the relative impacts they make, and offer guidance to universities for prioritizing improvements.



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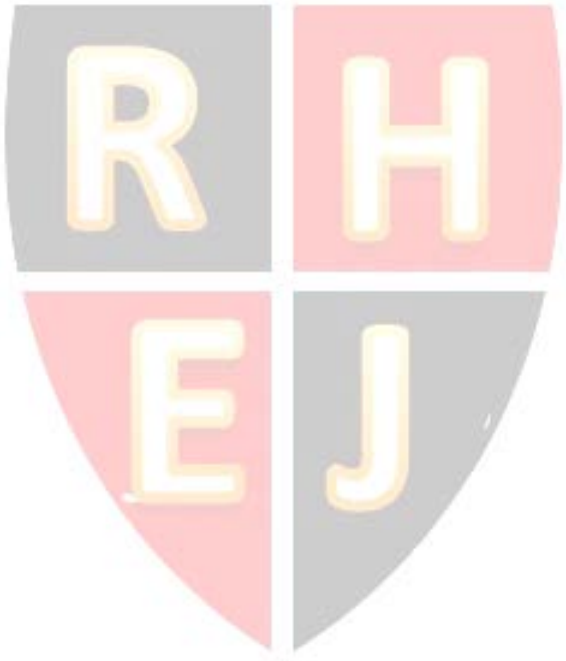

APPENDIX

Table 1

Desired professor behaviors based on average dollars spent (study objective 1)

Professor Behavior	Average $ spent	Percent of $20 spent
Good at presenting/explaining	3.53	17.6%
Enthusiastic/entertaining	2.98	14.9%
Reasonable workload	2.53	12.7%
Clear expectations	2.38	11.9%
High expertise	2.23	11.2%
Helpful feedback class performance	1.52	7.6%
Interactive	1.51	7.6%
Warm/compassionate	1.25	6.2%
Intellectually challenging	1.12	5.6%
Helpful feedback beyond class	0.96	4.8%

Results appear in descending order of amount of dollars spent.

Table 2

Desired behaviors based on low versus high mastery orientation (study objective 2)

	Average $ spent			
Professor Behavior	Low Mastery	High Mastery	Difference	p-value
Clear expectations	2.57	2.19	-0.38	0.010*
Intellectually challenging	0.94	1.31	0.37	0.002**
High expertise	2.01	2.30	0.29	0.040*
Reasonable workload	2.70	2.42	-0.28	0.076
Interactive	1.42	1.66	0.24	0.054
Helpful feedback class perf.	1.62	1.40	-0.22	0.074
Helpful feedback beyond class	0.87	1.05	0.18	0.092
Good at presenting/explaining	3.60	3.46	0.14	0.374
Warm/compassionate	1.26	1.22	0.04	0.718
Enthusiastic/entertaining	3.01	2.98	0.03	0.822

Results appear in descending order of absolute difference in amount of dollars spent.
P-values reflect the results of two-tailed paired t-tests. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 3

Desired behaviors based on quantitative versus qualitative coursework (study objective 3)

	Average $ spent			
Professor Behavior	Quantitative (Finance)	Qualitative (Marketing)	Difference	p-value
High expertise	2.05	2.41	0.36	0.006**
Helpful feedback class perf.	1.65	1.39	-0.26	0.015*
Interactive	1.60	1.42	-0.18	0.098
Clear expectations	2.47	2.29	-0.18	0.151
Enthusiastic/entertaining	2.89	3.07	0.18	0.186
Good at presenting/explaining	3.61	3.44	-0.17	0.248
Warm/compassionate	1.17	1.32	0.15	0.134
Intellectually challenging	1.06	1.18	0.12	0.239
Reasonable workload	2.54	2.52	-0.02	0.880
Helpful feedback beyond class	0.96	0.95	-0.01	0.937

Results appear in descending order of absolute difference in amount of dollars spent.
P-values reflect the results of two-tailed paired t-tests. *p < .05. **p < .01.