Educational Achievement and Satisfaction through Generations

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Abstract

Generational experiences help to mold the values and beliefs of each generation, impacting how they view the world. This paper analyzes how student from the various generations view academic achievement. Student trends in terms of student satisfaction and a review of why students appeal grades are collected and analyzed with a lens toward generational characteristics of students. Conclusions from this study will lead researchers to substantiate or null the following hypotheses: 1) a significant relationship exists between generational characteristics and student satisfaction with their grades. 2) A significant relationship exists between generational characteristics and students who file grade appeals.

Introduction

The definition of what determines a grade has long been a topic of debate which has been further complicated by the inception of standards based learning. At the PK-12 level it has not been uncommon for teachers to inflate student grades based on a student's effort regardless of content mastery. In higher education this practice seems to support what many instructors see as the dreaded grade appeal where students seem to intertwine effort and mastery of course content. It is a common refrain in student written appeals for a grade change that they believe their hard work warranted a higher grade than assigned by the instructor. In an effort to better understand and improve instructor and student understanding of grades this paper will analyze how students from the various generations view academic achievement. A generation can be defined as a group of people born within a 20 year time period (Codrington and Marshall, 2004). Generational experiences help to mold the values and beliefs of each generation, impacting how they view the world.

Data gathered from student satisfaction surveys will provide patterns and trends which will be further analyzed utilizing generational characteristics of students. This data will help to determine what students perceive to be a satisfying academic experience. Additionally, a review of why students appeal grades will be collected and analyzed with a lens towards the generational characteristics of students. The hope is that this analysis will provide important information which can better support instructors and students towards a better understanding of academic grades.

Research Study

Based upon the information presented in Table 1 and Table 2 below and the student study satisfaction data, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. A significant relationship exists between the generational characteristics and student satisfaction with their grades.
2. A significant relationship exists between generational characteristics and students who file grade appeals.

Generational Characteristics

The literature suggests that educators have been aware that people have different dispositions towards learning (Felder & Silverman, 1998). The different dispositions are referred to as learning styles, which form a student's unique learning preference and aid teachers in the planning of teaching delivery methods (Kemp, Morrison & Ross, 1998). The idea of tailoring teaching to the learning style of the audience has been suggested since the early 1970s. The concept of categorizing learning styles to different generations of students is a more recent development. Cambiano, De Vore & Harvey (2001) identified the following five generational groupings: (a) Traditionalists: 1922 – 1943 (over 65); (b) Baby Boomers: 1944 – 1964 (44 – 64); (c) Generation X: 1965 – 1977 (31 – 43); (d) Generation Y: 1978 – 1994 (14 – 30); (e) Generation Z: 1995 - present (Under 14). For the purposes of this paper only the Baby Boomers, Generation Y and the Millennial Generation will be explored.

After World War II (1945+), the GI bill provided opportunities for military men to attend school and to have the opportunity to receive Veteran Administration loans to purchase homes. From 1946 to 1964 there was an increase in the number of babies born resulting in the term baby boomers. In the chart that follows, Corich (2008) focused on characteristics of three generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y). It is also important to note key learner characteristics of each group since knowing them will shed light on key elements of student satisfaction and how generational characteristics impact student satisfaction. The following two tables depict generational characteristics and learning styles (Corch, 2008).

Table I: Generational Characteristics

Generation Baby Boomers	Generation X characteristics	Generation Y characteristics
• Idealistic • Competitive • Questioners of authority • Tend to be optimistic • Like teamwork • Tend to be self-centered • Eager to put their own stamp on things	• Self-reliant • Resourceful • Distrustful of institutions • Highly adaptive • Skeptical • Desire balance • Enjoy informality • Are technically savvy • Respect is expected • Career not most important thing • Career hop to build skills • Want immediate feedback	• Globally concerned • Realistic • Technological savvy • Sociable • Diverse • Desire to achieve • Environmentally conscious

Table 2: Generational Learning Characteristics

Generation	*Learning Characteristics*	*Learning Characteristics*	*Learning Characteristics*
Baby Boomers	Linear learning: logical presentation	Accept objectives	Accept what is said
Generation X	Interactivity with technology	Teach relevancy, give choices, i.e. "test out"	Prefer "job aid" or performance tool
Generation Y	Use of KWL	Choose what they want to research read what they prefer	AVK learners: realistic, technology motivated (not memory), short attention span, adults are peers

Perceptions of Grading Systems

Educational institutions have used a grading system since the beginning of recorded history. The type of grade has differed, but a standard of some type has always been established. The most common form of evaluation has been formalized testing. This has been accomplished through quizzes and textbook tests. It did not matter whether a student was in elementary, secondary, or higher education, the assessment has always been very similar. Universities today use a variety of grading systems, both formative and summative. Some of the grading artifacts used by instructors include: formal examinations which may be given during and/or at the end of a course, quizzes, portfolios, oral presentations, "authentic" assessments, group projects, and thesis and dissertations. Often included in syllabi as partial fulfillment of courses are "hidden assessment" components such as participation in class and attendance. On-line courses often, also, use such items as amount of time logged into the course, number of discussions addressed, and grammar used in discussion boards. Regardless of the standard used to evaluate a student's progress and knowledge, there will always be room for disagreement between the instructor and the learner and any one of the above mentioned items may be grounds for a grade appeal.

During the past three to four decades, first elementary, and then secondary, educators began to add "hidden assessments" into the evaluative equation. These hidden equations included a non-product oriented factor called "effort". Today, most elementary schools integrate into their evaluative system the concept of "a determined attempt" when deciding grades for students. Secondary educators include the notion of "effort" in many classes. Zirkle (2000) cites a Supreme Court case in which a parent asked that her child's grade in PE be changed, because she said her daughter had put forth great effort even though the teacher stated the student did not meet the criteria for the higher grade. The Supreme Court cited grading and related academic issues as requiring "an expert evaluation of cumulative information….not readily adaptive to the procedural tools of judicial….decision making" (Zirkle, 2007).

Student Satisfaction

As noted in Table 2, a learning characteristic of Generation X is interactivity, which is a dialog that occurs between a human being and a computer program. Displayed images and text, printouts, motion video sequences, and sounds are output forms of interactivity. Interactivity allows individuals a choice in how their learning would be presented. For example, an individual could view a PowerPoint presentation by either reading or listening to the audio for the presentation. Moreover, Generation X prefers a job aid or performance support tools to which they can refer later. The one characteristic that Generation X shares with the Baby Boomers is the preference for linear content (Corich, 2008, p. 201). For example, multicast is viewed as an essential part of live (linear) content delivery. In computer networking, multicast is the delivery of a message or information to a group of destination computers simultaneously in a single transmission from the source.

Generation Y has added to the idea of entitlement. The students of this generation accept the notion that grades are a right rather than a product that has been earned. This is not unique to the educational system alone. Twenge (2006) in her book, *Generation Me*, discusses the concept of entitlement which comes from our culture as a whole. Parents and others have contributed to the "specialness" of the present generation and have focused on the child's self-esteem rather than on what they accomplished.

Competition has been played down in an attempt to assure all persons have an equal opportunity to succeed. Little League teams frequently do not keep score during a game, and all children get a certificate of success at the culmination of the event regardless of their achievement. Grades are often not given in some classes, and the word "special" is used to refer to everyone. This distortion of exceptionality has created a misperception in the mind of many about product-oriented success. Interestingly, this perception is not exclusive to the United States. The literature indicates schools in Japan and China are experiencing a similar increase in the number of students demanding higher grades as a result of their entitlement (NU, 2009; Quinn & Matsuura, 2012).

Technology is being credited for some of the behaviors demonstrated by students. "I want it and I want it now!" is a by-product of the way technology functions. Instantaneous results and responses are an expectation, not a luxury. Instructors are expected to respond to student's e-mails at any hour of the day or night. Course grades are expected to be given within 12-24 hours of the final session of class. The ability to resist impulsivity is frequently not obtainable to the student (Greenberger, 2007). How have the entitlement attitude and the behaviors seen in classes today represent themselves in relation to university grades? It would be difficult to find a university instructor who has not seen an e-mail, or heard a remark, such as the following: "After getting my grade for your class a couple of days ago, I keep going over and over what exactly you expected out of your SOC 152 students. I'm questioning who/what sets the standard for your class...To me, if a student does/hands in all assignments, misses class no more than two times, participates during lecture, takes notes, attentively watches videos, ...it would make sense for that student to receive a respectable grade--an A.

It seems like the work and time that I (and I'm assuming other students) put into this class didn't create the results that I (or you) wanted. Personally, I can't comprehend how my performance in your class equated to an 87 percent" (Lippman, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009). More emphasis is being put on the hidden assessment components than on the knowledge-based portion of a course. Students are not as concerned about the textbook readings, lectures, or content, as they are the peripheral elements. Complaints and grade appeals often refer to the amount of time it took to complete an assignment, the effort the student put into the paper, the amount of work they had to do for the class or the fact the instructor did not respond in an appropriate amount of time; none of which pertain to the content of the classes. Lippman, Bulanda, and Wagenaar (2009) "observe students' entitlement to be a self-centered disposition characterized by a general disregard for traditional faculty relationship boundaries and authority" (p. 197). Classroom incivility is common place in the halls of academia (Boice, 1996). Students see no problem with commanding a specific grade, telling an instructor what and how a course should be taught, and demanding and acting rudely to other students and instructors.

The Age of Entitlement directly affects the way classes are taught, course content, instructor evaluations, student's attitudes, grade outcomes, and university policies. Students are more frequently expecting and demanding an education based upon effort and time on task rather than on the development of understanding and knowledge of a particular course of study. Grade inflation is due to instructors not wanting to receive low evaluations from students who do not want to put effort into a course (Ewing, 2012). Grade appeals are submitted when students consider their grade to be a result of something other than effort. Universities are concerned about the cost and must face students, parents, communities, and public opinion. The result of student perceptions on how grades are administered has its effect on all areas of university life. According to Holden and Westfall (2011), disturbing trends associated with student work have been found over multiple generations. Some of the most disturbing are student perceptions of entitlement of personal rights to a much greater degree than other generations (Holden & Westfall, 2011). Webster defines "entitlement" as 'a belief that one is deserving of or entitled to certain privileges' (Merriam-Webster, 2010). The purpose of this section is to examine various generational characteristics of university students in light of their perceptions of privilege as it relates to grades and grade appeals and how it relates to student satisfaction. The perception of entitlement is with us and will be for quite a while. The quality of student engagement that satisfies the professional needs of the instructor and the self-fulfilling needs of the student should be the focus of university faculty dialogue.

A student satisfaction study was conducted in a private non-profit institution of higher education that focused on student satisfaction with the mean age falling into the generation X age span of 31 to 43. The study was designed to determine whether these students were more than likely or less than likely to recommend the university. Important criteria on which the study was based were as follows: convenience, program completion timelines, online course offerings, quality of faculty, and quality of education.

In keeping with some of the main learning characteristics of Generation X (See Table 2), it is no surprise that the main reason students would refer others to the university is for convenience. On the other hand, the main reason students would be less likely to refer others to the university is quality of education. Students cited the absence of the following for their dissatisfaction: absence of linear learning, choices, relevancy, job aids or performance tools, and interactivity supported by new technology.   Grade appeals are another indicator of student dissatisfaction. When students are less satisfied with their learning experience, many tend to look outside themselves for rationales. One significant characteristic of the Generation X was "distrust of institutions, skeptical, and desire for immediate feedback" (Corich, 2008, p. 202). When characteristics of a generation are not aligned with favored learning styles of that generation, student satisfaction falls and grade appeals are more likely to ensue.

Grade Appeals

The following criteria are commonly used by institutions of higher learning for submitting of grade appeals: (a) Error in calculating the grade; (b) Failure of the instructor to notify students clearly and promptly of the criteria for grade determination; (c)Assignment of a grade based on reasons other than the announced criteria and standards; (d) Assignment of a grade based on factors other than student achievement such as personal bias and (e) inconsistent or inequitably applied standards for evaluation of student academic performance. Based on the review of the data, the following assumptions were identified in Table 3 for reducing the number of grade appeals.

An Analysis of Grade Appeal Data

Table 3			
	Results	Assumptions	Recommendations
An error in calculating the grade	30%	Human error (i.e., calculations) Incorrect data uploaded into digital grading systems	Faculty professional development in electronic systems used for entering grades
Failure of the instructor to notify students clearly and promptly of the criteria for grade determination	19%	Unclear syllabus Unclear assignments/projects Unclear grading procedure/policy	Professional development for faculty in the following areas: Standardized syllabi Determining program and class learning objectives to align with assignments/projects Standardized grading Developing effective rubrics Calibrating rubrics
Assignment of grades based on reasons other than announced criteria and standards	5%	Unclear syllabus Unclear assignments/projects Unclear grading procedure/policy	Professional development for faculty in the following areas: Standardized syllabi Determining program and class learning objectives to align with assignments/projects Standardized grading Developing effective rubrics Calibrating rubrics
Assignment of a grade based on factors other than student achievement, e.g., personal bias	27%	Miscommunication Lack of teacher/student trust Lack of immediate feedback and response	Profession development for faculty in the following areas: Developing learning communities onsite/online Digital communication programs such as Skype, ClassLive Pro
Inconsistent of inequitably applied standards for evaluation of student performance	17%	Unclear syllabus Unclear assignments/projects Unclear grading procedure/policy	Professional development for faculty in the following areas: Standardized syllabi Determining program and class learning objectives to align with assignments/projects Standardized grading Developing effective rubrics Calibrating rubrics

A student may choose to submit a grade appeal if the student believes that the grade earned for a completed university course was less than anticipated. An analysis of the grade appeal data for 2010-2011 at one institution of higher education indicated the four major criteria for student submission of grade appeals are as follows: (a) an error in calculating the grade; assignment of a grade based on factors other than student achievement; (b) failure of instructor to notify students clearly and promptly of the criteria for grade determination and; (c) inconsistent inequitably applied standards for evaluation of student academic performance. Based on an analysis of the data from the aforementioned university, the following were identified: Fifty-nine grade appeals were submitted. Thirty-percent (18) were submitted for error in calculating the grade. Nineteen percent (11) were submitted for the failure of the instructor to notify instructors of the criteria for grade determination. Five percent (3) of the appeals were for assignment of a grade based on reasons other than the announced criteria and standards. Twenty-seven percent (16) of the appeals were for assignment of grade based on factors other than student achievement such as personal bias. Seventeen percent (10) appeals were inconsistent or inequitable applied standards for evaluation of student academic performance.

Conclusion

Within the institution that is higher education, how do we correctly address the values of our clientele? Of utmost importance, how do we take such action without compromising institutional standards, expectations, and integrity? Generations have rooted their values based upon observations, experiences, and perceptions. The concept of entitlement and the perception of privilege may well be in conflict across generations. If indeed, generational experiences mold the values and beliefs of a specific generation, influencing how they view the world, it is imperative to blend each generation's strengths and judgment as we deal with the experiential gap. What has happened to institution of higher education that we all thought we knew? It remains standing tall and will only prevail in time based upon its established policies and procedures for the betterment of intergenerational understanding.

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