

Student-instructor academic relationships: effects of background and culture

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Abstract

Building a strong academic relationship between a student and an instructor usually takes some time and is impacted by many factors. Some factors affecting the development of this relationship include instructor background, culture, age, and experience. In this work, we explore how these factors shaped the students' perception of their instructor. These perceptions were recorded through a survey probing students' opinions about their instructor in terms of background/cultural barriers, teaching style, approachability, fairness, etc. To improve statistics and uncover correlations, the study was conducted in several courses (day and evening courses) with different students' group (freshmen, juniors, seniors) and across different instructors with diverse background/culture and experience. The effect of the instructor background, culture, and experience on the student perception of the instructor are analyzed.

Keywords

Student-faculty relationships; Student perceptions; Cultural knowledge

The Purpose of the Study

A productive academic relationship between students and instructors, both inside and outside the classroom, is a key point for the students' success. Students with good academic relations with their instructor will be more eager to attend class, will be more invested in the course content, will interact more openly with their instructor both inside and outside the classroom, will be more likely to ask for assistance if needed, and are likely to receive higher grades. Despite this importance, building an excellent student-instructor academic relation is not an easy process and is often challenged by many barriers. The first challenge in developing an academic relationship is the students' first impression of the instructor: Is this instructor approachable? Are they fair? Do they care about students and treat all students with respect? While it is not an easy process for any instructor, certain factors may affect this first impression and the students' initial timidity. Some factors that may be barriers include instructor background, culture, age, and experience. Hypothetically, it may be easier for a professor of similar cultural background or one closer in age to the students to develop an academic relationship faster than an instructor of different cultural background or age. Similarly, an instructor's experience in their field and perceived level of expertise may expedite the process of building a positive student-instructor relationship.

The goal of this work is to examine the influence of instructor background and culture on students' initial impression of their instructor, which is known to influence the process of building an excellent student-instructor academic relationship. Data were collected through an

online questionnaire distributed to students near the beginning of the semester. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

Question 1: Have you previously taken a class with this professor?

Question 2: Do you feel any background/culture barriers between you and this professor?

Question 3: If your answer to question 2 is yes, do you think these background/culture barriers will affect your ability to learn the material of this course? (If your answer to question 2 is no, please skip to question 4.)

Question 4: I think this professor is approachable and easy to develop a good academic relationship with.

Question 5: I think this professor knows how to teach and use different teaching/learning methods (lectures, videos, etc.)

Question 6: I think the material presented during class time is logical and easy to follow.

Question 7: I think this professor cares about and engages every student.

Question 8: I think this professor is fair and treats each student with respect.

Question 9: Please share any other comments or observations about this professor.

Questions 1 through 3 were “Yes/No” answers, while questions 4 through 8 measured the level of agreement with the statements on a Likert five-point scale (5 - Strongly agree, 4 - Moderately agree, 3 - Neither agree nor disagree, 2 - Moderately disagree, 1 - Strongly disagree). Question 9 is an open-ended question that gives the students the opportunity to share their early observations about the instructor. In addition to serving as data for this study, this question provided an opportunity for early feedback to the instructor on the areas for improvement throughout the semester.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on the importance of the student-faculty academic relation. All of these studies emphasize the importance of caring for student interests, as well as sharing the belief that a socially and culturally based approach must be utilized in modern teaching. Faculty members that were able to adequately convey their compassion and attentiveness for student concerns were uniformly seen as effective.

In the United States, much research has pointed to the need for higher education to develop programs to engage faculty with students. For example, Wilson¹ performed a comprehensive study related to indigenous cultures. In this study students reported that personal relationships developed between themselves and their professors was a motivating factor in their success in undergraduate courses. What mattered most to these students was the personal contact they had with their professors. The study also indicated the significance of the quality of the interaction that students had with their professors. Wilson suggested that professors should consider the effects of their interactions with all students and to make necessary changes. O’Meara et. al.² pointed out that the type of relationship between the teacher and the student can greatly influence student behavior, academic performance, and overall sense of social acceptance in the school. This is because one’s position as a professor places them in the role of the most influential person shaping student academic trajectory, and student-faculty relationships have been found to significantly affect students’ learning and motivation for academic success. In another study, Guiffrida et al.³ indicated that the robustness of student–faculty relationships may also be a function of student motivation. A desire to have a strong student-faculty relationship showed a

positive correlation to GPA. In other words, higher education students that seek to connect with faculty and staff are most likely to establish these relationships and gain from them by earning higher GPAs. Again, the desire to associate with faculty may be a sign of the significance of one's academic intentions.

Many other studies affirmed that inclusive classroom practices and professors' intercultural competence play a critical role in creating a positive campus climate for students. Glass et al.⁴ studied international student experiences and cited three factors of student-faculty interactions that made a positive contribution towards their learning and development:

- a. *Participation and inclusion.* Students described how professors found culturally sensitive ways to foster inclusion through expressions of appreciation, emphasis on the importance of a student's contributions during class, and one-on-one conversations. Several expressed how the faculty's concern led them to become more active and involved in class discussions.
- b. *Personal ways of knowing.* Students observed professors as models and gained awareness of their own active role in constructing knowledge for themselves.
- c. *Possible selves.* Admired professors served as powerful role models who strongly motivated the student's behavior in support of this concept.

In a similar study, Jin & Schneider⁵ demonstrated that there were multiple statistically significant relationships between faculty background characteristics and views on students. For example, faculty whose backgrounds are most similar to those of international students in regards to culture, ethnicity, and upbringing have the best chances of understanding and empathizing with them. For some institutions, this can be a crucial consideration in the recruitment and hiring of new faculty. In their thorough research Gay⁶ and Aronson⁷ defined and pinpointed the importance of culturally-responsive teachers. Instructors should understand the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them⁷. By bearing in mind the implications of one's cultural background and by setting high expectations for students with a commitment to each student's success, culturally-responsive teachers are both socially and academically empowering. Culturally-responsive teachers are multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives.⁷

The effect of student and professor interaction has also been studied internationally. In Ghana, Nyadano et. al.⁸ independently found that a good lecturer-student relationship is essential to the students' complete and long-term development. They recommended that policy makers, university authorities and students must apply themselves and resources to build good student-lecturer relationship that improve education.

Survey Results

This study is the initial installment of a planned, multi-year survey effort. Instructor participation is/was voluntary and as a result these first-round data reflect survey responses from the combined classes of only 5 faculty members. Accordingly, the participating courses were effectively selected at random and not for a particular student year and/or course curricula. In particular, this initial data set does not contain survey results from sophomore-level students. As such, some of

the statistical analyses using instructor traits (e.g. female vs. male, US vs. non-US) are caveated, where appropriate, as currently tenuous. It is intended that future installments of the survey will bolster student sample size, the number of participating instructors, and the represented engineering disciplines (currently only Mechanical Engineering).

The survey was distributed during first weeks of Fall semester in twelve course sections taught by five faculty members. A total of 195 responses were collected and analyzed from the perspective of student year (Freshman, Junior and Senior), student type (Day vs. Evening), instructor origin (US-born vs. non-US) and instructor gender (male vs female). Eleven course sections contained a majority of students (more than 80%) that were not familiar with the instructor, while one section had a majority of students (more than 60%) that were familiar with the instructor. A small number of Day Juniors felt background/culture barriers with their female (4%) and non-US-born instructors (30% in one section). Some of those students felt that these barriers would affect their ability to learn the material of this course (2% in relation to female and 20% for non-US-born instructors).

The student responses to Questions 4 through 8 are presented in Figure 1, with a higher number indicating a higher level of agreement with the question. The results are broken out based on the student year and by instructor origin.

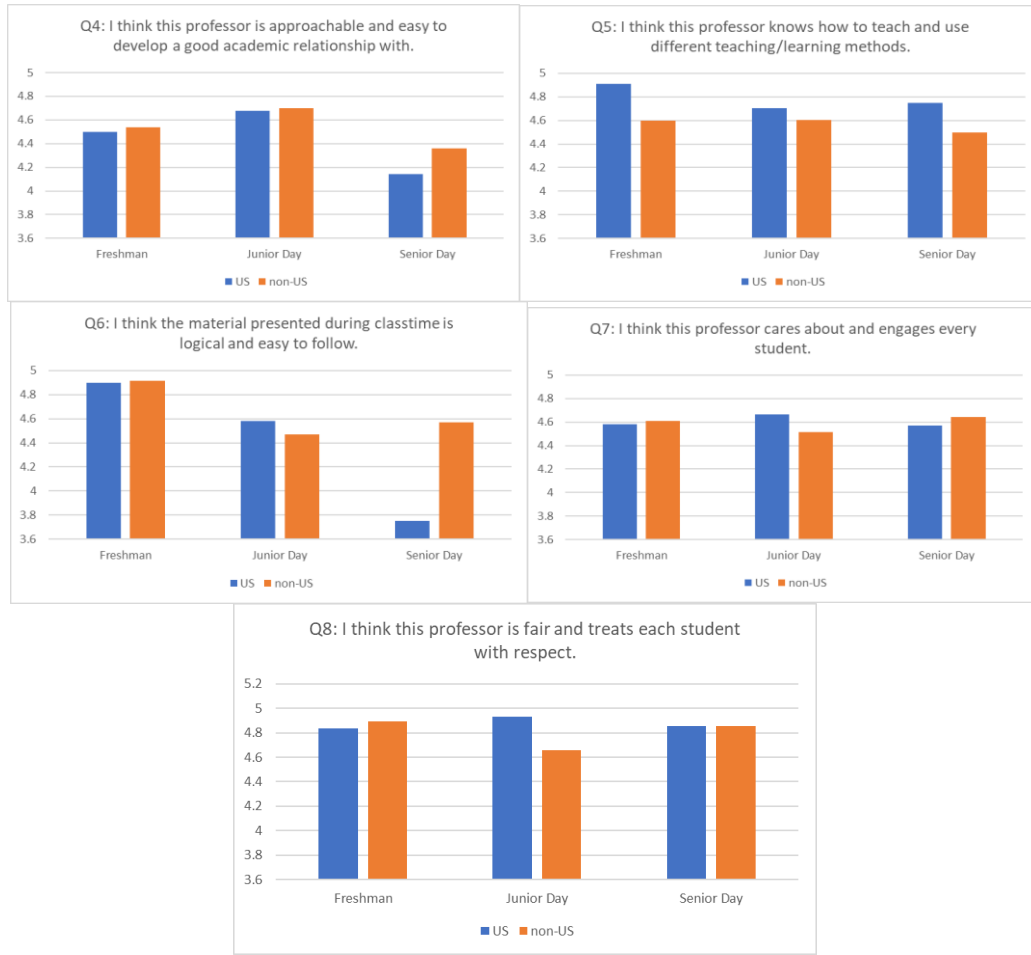


Fig. 1. The response to Questions 4 through 8 based on the faculty origins.

The survey results presented in Fig. 1 show that students find non-US-born instructors as slightly more approachable (Q4) but less ready to teach and use different teaching/learning methods (Q5). It is fascinating to notice that Freshmen and Juniors do not notice a difference in course material presentation between instructors (Q6) while Seniors strongly differentiated between US- and non-US-born professors. However, this result is difficult to justify as the survey evaluated only one instructor per student group.

Focusing on the responses for just the non-US-born instructors, the responses to Questions 4 through 8 are presented in Figure 2. The results are broken out based on student year and student type. The figure also shows that evening students generally had a more positive view of their non-US born instructors than their day student counterparts.

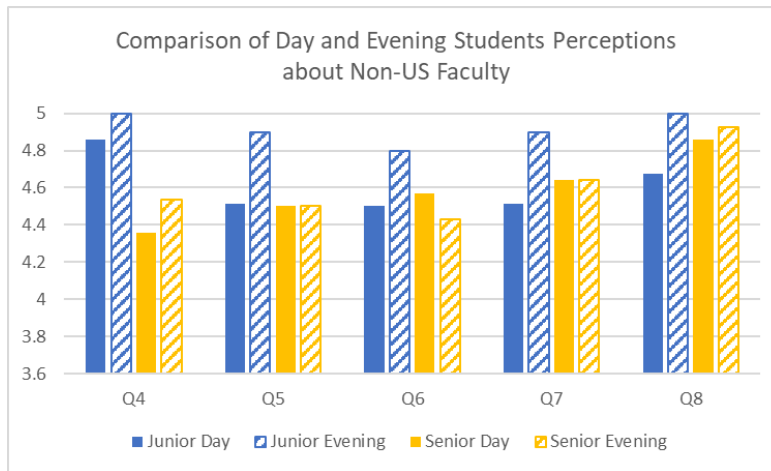


Fig. 2. The responses to Questions 4 through 8 for non-US born instructors based on student year and type.

Focusing on instructor gender, the responses to Questions 4 through 8 are presented in Figure 3. The results are broken out based on student year and instructor gender.

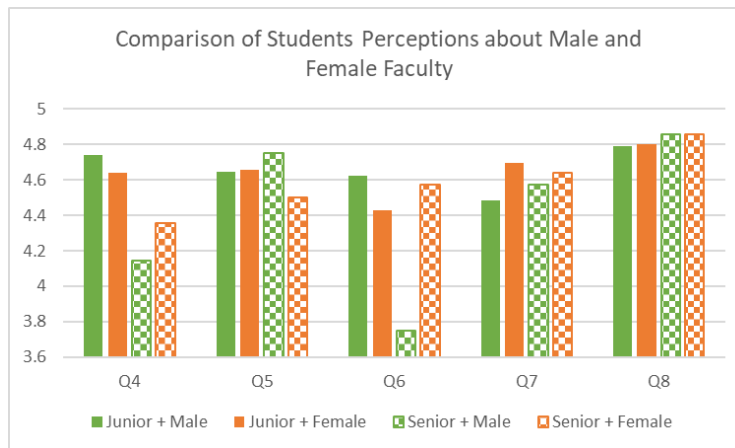


Fig. 3. The responses to Questions 4 through 8 based on student year and faculty gender.

Figure 3 shows that in a comparison between male and female faculty, there is a slightly higher perception that females care /engage more (Q7) and are more fair /respectful (Q8). However, results regarding the impact of instructor gender on approachability (Q4), readiness to teach (Q5), and logical presentation (Q6) were dependent on student year. The differences in scores from Senior students, especially for Q4 and Q6, are difficult to justify as the survey evaluated only one instructor per student group.

The survey also allowed students to leave written comments (Q9). Most of the remarks were very course specific and related to course structure and class activities: example problems presented on the board, quizzes, tests and reviews. Many of them highlighted instructor's professionalism, preparedness, knowledge and passion for students. A few observations related to instructor's culture and country of origin:

- 'I think that once we get more into the semester and I have more interactions with this professor, then I will have a more comprehensive understanding of this professor.'
- 'Sometimes I can't really understand [instructor] with [instructor's] accent.'
- 'I thoroughly enjoy being in class and how the Professor presents the material. I believe the cultural difference enhances and shows a different perspective of the material. I believe [instructor] is an effective Professor and is very knowledgeable in the field. I look forward to having [instructor] in the future.'
- 'The language barrier between our class and [instructor] is one that has and is hampering both me and my classmates ability to understand the material. [Instructor] also does not engage the students enough other than speaking off a PowerPoint with a inaudible tone of voice making it hard for many of us to stay awake and for those who do stay awake to understand the material.'
- '[Instructor's] accent can sometimes be hard to follow and understand and I just find myself having to teach myself from the slides cause I don't know what [instructor is] saying. But [instructor] is very approachable and easy to talk to so it's not hard just to ask [instructor] to repeat it again.'
- 'I appreciate [instructor's] authenticity. [Instructor's] authenticity makes [instructor] very approachable which is conducive to learning. [Instructor is] not too serious, but serious enough to make sure everything gets done. [Instructor] is very knowledgeable on the subjects [instructor] teaches and there is not even a hint of a condescending attitude when a question is asked. We have plenty of resources to complete the assignments.'

Conclusion

In this study a survey was distributed at the beginning of the semester to investigate the students' initial perception about their instructor. Data were collected from several courses of different student type (day, evening), different student group (freshmen, juniors, and seniors), and across different instructors. The majority of students surveyed (more than 80%) have their instructor for the first time. Instructors of varying ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, gender, and teaching experience participated in this study. Based on the survey results, the majority of students; freshmen (day-student), Junior (evening student) and seniors (day and evening student) see no difference between US-born and non-US-born instructors. They didn't feel any background/culture barrier

that will alter their ability to learn the material of the course. Very few junior-day students felt that there is a background/culture barrier. Moreover, a small percentage of this group felt that these barriers will affect their learning abilities. In terms of approachability and teaching styles, the results show that non-US-born instructors are more approachable but less ready to teach and use different teaching methods. Comparison of the results based on the student year demonstrated that while freshmen and senior students express that all professors (US-born and non-US-born) are fair and treat students with respect, junior students favor the US-born over the non-US-born. This finding is consistent with their first perception about the background/culture barrier feeling. The study also shows that there is slightly higher perception about females caring / engaging and being fair / respectful as compared to male instructors.

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