

# Examining Teaching Clarity: Student Engagement and Faculty Practice

Although clarity of instruction is generally promoted as an effective teaching practice, we know little about how widely students are exposed to this practice in undergraduate education, and even less is known about the extent to which different faculty emphasize clarity in their teaching. In addition, little research has been done to link teaching clarity to other forms of effective educational practice such as student-faculty interaction or active and collaborative learning. This study explores the teaching clarity (TC) behaviors students are exposed to and the extent to which these behaviors relate to student engagement, deep learning, and self-reported gains in college using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement. Using complementary data from the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, this study further explores TC by examining faculty perceptions of the importance of TC as well as the relationship between TC and faculty use of other effective educational practices.

## Student Data Source and Sample

- The data come from the 2010 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement
- The sample for this study consists of 8102 (41%) first-year students and 11,761 (59%) seniors from 38 baccalaureate granting institutions
- The teaching clarity items used in this study were adapted from the Wabash National Study

### Student Teaching Clarity items:

In your experience during the current school year, about how often did your instructors do each of the following?

(Never, Sometimes, Often, Very Often)

- Gave clear explanations of assignments
- Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- Reviewed and summarized course material effectively
- Made abstract ideas and theories understandable
- Gave assignments that helped you learn the course material
- Presented course material in an organized way
- Came to class well-prepared
- Used class time effectively
- Explained course goals and requirements clearly

### Sample Student Characteristics (FY/SR):

- 35/34% Male
  - 12/55% Transfer
  - 91/73% Full-time enrollment
  - 49/56% First-generation
  - 88/48% 24 years old or younger
  - 54/57% White, 15/12% African American/Black, 13/14% Latino, 7/5% Asian/Pacific Islander
  - 12/11% in Arts & Humanities, 9/5% Biological Sciences, 16/22% Business, 9/10% Education, 6/4% Engineering, 4/3% Physical Sciences, 13/12% Professional Studies, 12/13% Social Sciences
  - 39/51% Mostly A's, 47/43% Mostly B's, 13/6% Mostly C's
- Institution Characteristics:**
- 19/17% doctorate granting, 49/49% master's granting, 31/34% bachelor's granting
  - 45/49% Public

## Faculty Data Source and Sample

- The data come from the 2011 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement
- The sample for this study consists of nearly 4,400 faculty members from 40 different colleges and universities (two institutions were Canadian)

### Faculty Teaching Clarity Items:

How important is it that you [faculty] do the following in your courses?

(Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much)

- Clearly explain course goals and requirements
- Teach course sessions in an organized way
- Use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- Use a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate diversity in student learning styles
- Clarify that material is understood before moving on
- Provide standards for satisfactory completion of assignments
- Provide frequent written or oral feedback on students' academic progress
- Provide prompt written or oral feedback on students' academic progress
- Describe the practical application of course material

### Sample Faculty Characteristics:

- 74% White
  - 55% Male
  - 95% US citizen
  - 41% 55 years old or older
  - 64% earned doctorate degree
  - 46% at least 15 years of experience teaching
  - 26% in Arts & Humanities, 5% Biological Sciences, 12% Business, 7% Education, 4% Engineering, 11% Physical Sciences, 11% Professional Studies, 12% Social Sciences
  - 26% Professors, 24% Associate Professors, 26% Assistant Professors, 11% full-time instructors/lecturers, 14% part-time instructors/lecturers
  - 39% tenured, 19% on tenure track, 28% not on the tenure track, 15% no tenure system
- Institution Characteristics:**
- 18% doctorate granting, 40% master's granting, 42% bachelor's granting
  - 41% non- or less-competitive institutions, 29% competitive institutions

## See more details of this study at [nsse.iub.edu/html/pubs.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pubs.cfm)

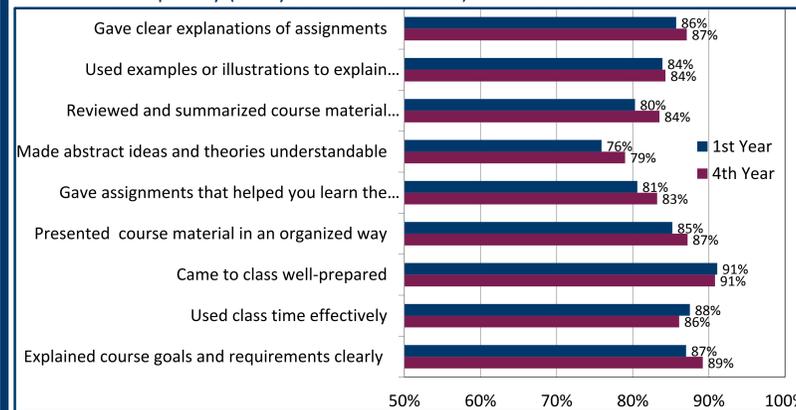
BrckaLorenz, A., Ribera, T., Kinzie, J., & Cole, E. (2012). Examining effective faculty practice. *To Improve the Academy*, 31, 149-160.

Ribera, T., BrckaLorenz, A., Cole, E., & Nelson Laird, T. (April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Examining the importance of teaching clarity: Findings from the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

## Student Results

### Research Question 1: What TC behaviors are students exposed to most and least frequently?

Percent of Frequently ("Very Often" or "Often") Observed TC Behaviors:



Frequencies of teaching clarity items were used to identify which behaviors were "frequently" ("very often" or "often") observed. More frequently observed behaviors were instructors coming to class well-prepared and instructors explaining course goals and requirements clearly. Less frequently observed behaviors include instructors reviewing and summarizing course material effectively and instructors making abstract ideas and theories understandable. Frequencies by disciplinary major fields can be found on our website.

### Research Question 2: How does TC relate to student engagement?

Pearson's *r* correlations were used to relate the Teaching Clarity Scale to individual NSSE engagement survey items and NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice. For both first-years and seniors, the items with the highest correlations with the Teaching Clarity scale were about students' ratings of their relationships with faculty members, of their institution's emphasis on providing the support they need to succeed academically, and of their entire educational experience at their institution. Correlations between the Teaching Clarity Scale and NSSE Benchmarks can be found below ( $p < .001$ ). Information about the NSSE Benchmarks can be found on our website.

| NSSE Benchmarks                 | First-Years | Seniors |
|---------------------------------|-------------|---------|
| Level of Academic Challenge     | .397        | .364    |
| Active & Collaborative Learning | .276        | .200    |
| Student-Faculty Interaction     | .301        | .287    |
| Supportive Campus Environment   | .537        | .553    |

### Research Question 3: How does TC relate to deep learning and students' reports of gains in college?

Multivariate OLS regressions were used to measure the relationship between the Teaching Clarity scale and measures of deep learning and student-reported gains. The unstandardized coefficients represented below can be interpreted as effect sizes. For both first-years and seniors, the strongest relationships occur between the Teaching Clarity scale and student self-reported gains in college. More information about the scales used in this analysis as well as regression results by major disciplinary field can be found on our website.

|  | First-Years | Seniors |
|--|-------------|---------|
| Integrative Learning                     | ++          | ++      |
| Higher-Order Learning                    | ++          | ++      |
| Reflective Learning                      | +           | +       |
| Gains in Practical Competence            | +++         | +++     |
| Gains in Personal and Social Development | +++         | +++     |
| Gains in General Education               | +++         | +++     |

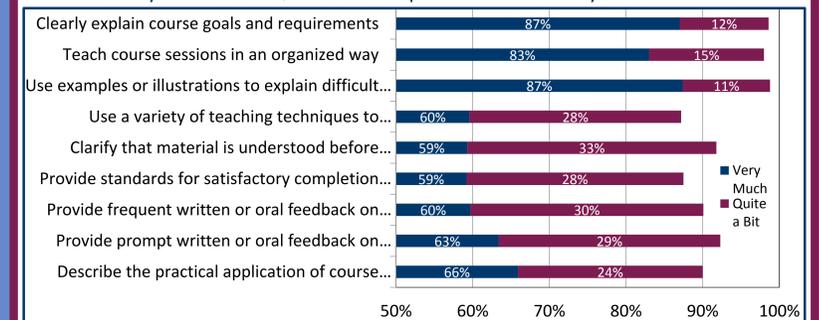
OLS regression models controlled for gender, transfer status, enrollment status, fraternity or sorority membership, athletic participation, race or ethnicity, primary major field, grades, first-generation status, age, institutional control, and institutional Carnegie Classification. All variables standardized before entry into models.

Key: all  $p < .001$ ; + unstd B > .2, ++ unstd B > .3, +++ unstd B > .4, ++++ unstd B > .5.

## Faculty Results

### Research Question 1: What TC behaviors do faculty find most and least important?

Percent "Very Much" or "Quite a Bit" Importance for Faculty TC Behaviors:



Frequencies of teaching clarity items were used to identify which behaviors were "very much" or "quite a bit" important to faculty. Clearly explaining course goals and requirements and teaching course sessions in an organized way were among the most important behaviors for faculty and among the most frequently observed behaviors for students. With 13% of faculty finding the use of a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles to be "very little" or "somewhat" important, this could be considered the least important TC behavior. Generally, however, all behaviors were found to be important to most faculty. Although using examples or illustrations to explain difficult points was one of the most important behaviors for faculty, the least frequently observed behavior for students was making abstract ideas and theories understandable. This could point to a disconnect between students and faculty—faculty may be providing good examples, but students may still not be understanding. This underlines the importance of formative assessment as a part of the teaching and learning process.

### Research Question 2: Which faculty have moderate, high, and very high perceptions of the importance of TC?

Faculty scores on the FTC scale (items D through I) were divided into three different groups to differentiate between faculty use of moderate (on average 'some' to 'quite a bit' important), high (on average 'quite a bit' important), or very high importance (on average 'very much' important) placed on these teaching clarity behaviors. Representation was as follows:

| Very High                                       | High                               | Moderate  |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| •More Education, Black/African American, female | •More Business, Asian, US citizens | •Less Business, Education, other Professional fields; Black/African American, part-time lecturers, faculty without a doctorate, female, faculty teaching in auxiliary locations or teaching from a distance |

### Research Question 3: How does the perception of TC relate to other forms of effective educational practice?

Multivariate OLS regressions were used to measure the relationship between the FTC scale and other forms of effective educational practice. The unstandardized coefficients represented below can be interpreted as effect sizes. The strongest relationships were between FTC and emphasis on student gains Intellectual Skills, Practical Skills, and Higher-Order Learning. These results indicate that faculty who place more importance on teaching clarity behaviors emphasize other important forms of student engagement in their classrooms and perceive that their students participate more in other important forms of student engagement. This supports the findings that students exposed to TC behaviors engage more in other beneficial activities. These findings underline the importance of continuing to study, understand, and implement TC behaviors.

| Effective Educational Practice     |     |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Faculty-Student Interaction        | ++  |
| Intellectual Skills                | +++ |
| Practical Skills                   | +++ |
| Personal and Social Responsibility | ++  |
| Reflective Learning                | ++  |
| Integrative Learning               | ++  |
| Higher-Order Learning              | +++ |

OLS regression models controlled for disciplinary field, rank, doctorate degree, years of experience teaching, course load, age, gender, citizenship, race, institutional control, and institutional Carnegie Classification. All variables standardized before entry into models.

Key: all  $p < .001$ ; ++ unstd B > .2, +++ unstd B > .3