

Student Perceptions of Great Teaching: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract: What behaviors do students consider as representative of exemplary teaching? Do those representations vary by context? This study evaluates 176 student nominations for a teaching award that asked nominators to articulate specific acts by individual instructors that exemplify “great teaching.” Through an iterative process, our content analysis identified 10 themes, which generally represent socioemotional connection, behaviors relevant to student learning, and instructor characteristics. We also identified two themes—the instructor as a model and as someone whose efforts exceed expectations—that do not appear frequently in existing literature. The quantitative analysis revealed that frequency of themes differed for instructors from traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines and those from professional programs in the health sciences.

Keywords: teaching awards, exemplary teaching, student perceptions of teaching excellence.

The goals of this study were (1) to determine what behaviors students consider to be examples of “great” teaching, (2) to determine whether those behaviors may vary by teaching context, and (3) to examine how this approach, which focuses on students’ perceptions, may relate to other strategies for defining effective teaching. Our approach is unusual in it uses the words of students who nominate faculty members for teaching awards as evidence of their perception of teaching effectiveness.

Although attempts to define effective teaching have involved a multiplicity of sources (primarily students and faculty) and methods (fixed-response/quantitative, open-ended/qualitative), there is considerable overlap among the definitions derived from these sources and approaches. Catano and Harvey (2011) found considerable overlap in the competencies identified in their analysis and competencies reported in other studies of master teachers (Cohen, 1981; Fulton, 1996; Marsh & Roche, 1997). Of the nine competencies they identified, only problem-solving and availability had not been identified previously. The other seven (communication, creativity, individual consideration, social awareness, feedback, professionalism, conscientiousness) had been identified in at least one of the previous studies. Furthermore, in a comparison of five studies (Marsh, 1987; Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Murray 1997; Feldman, 1989, 2007; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi 2001), Hativa (2014) notes:

In spite of the variation in number and content, several components appear repeatedly in many of these lists (under different titles). Four of these appear in at least four of the five studies: Organization; clarity; engagement/enthusiasm/interest/expression, and rapport/interaction/concern about and respect of students. Another four components appear in only three of the studies: Interaction/questioning and discussing; exams/grades/student evaluation; workload/difficulty; and student’s perceived learning/perceived outcome of impact of instruction. (p. 19).

While there is something of a consensus being built around general characteristics of effective teaching, Devlin and Samarwickrema (2010) argue that context is critical when considering effective teaching. Indeed, there is evidence that approaches to teaching may vary by discipline (Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001; Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006; Neumann, 2001) and that students in different disciplines may value different instructor characteristics (Alhija, 2017). Alhija (2017), for example, found that students in social sciences and humanities considered the relationship between student and instructor and teaching methods to be more important than did students in the hard and natural sciences.¹ Alhija concluded that students in the exact sciences either have “different expectations in terms of good teaching and/or views teaching in higher education as more instrumental than do students from the other groups” (p. 11). Directly relevant to the current study, Al-Mohaimed and Khan (2014) report that medical students valued characteristics related to performance more than personality characteristics.

Current Study

The current study aimed to define effective teaching through nominations for a teaching award that identified specific acts of “great teaching,” rather than characteristics of excellent instructors. Rather than have participants respond to questions about general behaviors or characteristics or about teachers or teaching in general, we analyzed responses from a pool of nominations for our institution’s “Caught in the Act of Great Teaching” award. Thus the descriptions of exemplary teaching came from self-directed nominators. We provided no further guidance, no lists of behaviors, no previously determined factors. Nominations described specific behaviors of specific individuals. So, this examination of students’ perceptions of teaching is based on spontaneous input from students in a variety of learning contexts and allowed us to have students independently identify behaviors that distinguish exemplary teaching.

Because ours is a mid-sized university that has an undergraduate curriculum in the tradition of the liberal arts and sciences and professional programs in the health sciences, we were able to gather data from a wider variety of teaching situations than those encompassed in many previous studies, thus allowing us to compare student perceptions of effective teaching in liberal arts and sciences and in health professions education. The context of teaching and learning varies between traditional liberal arts and science disciplines and professional health sciences disciplines at our university. Although high impact practices and experiential learning are encouraged in liberal arts and sciences classes, most interaction between instructors and students takes place in the classroom and most teaching involves lecture- and discussion-based pedagogy. Faculty who primarily teach in the liberal arts and sciences typically have some expectation for research productivity but, for most, the majority of their work effort is focused on teaching. On the other hand, education in the health professions includes both lecture/classroom-based foundational science as well as hands-on clinical experience in a professional context. Many of the faculty who teach in the health sciences are clinicians (e.g., physicians, physical therapists, nurses) or research scientists, i.e., their work effort is less focused on teaching. For example, the medical school curriculum consists of large lectures (with poor attendance and student access to video recordings of the lectures through the learning management system) during the first two years and education in the clinic or at the bedside in the later years. Thus, it is likely that the acts that qualify as exemplary teaching may differ in the two contexts.

In sum, the present study aimed to determine what students perceive to be characteristics of great teaching and to determine if those characteristics vary by discipline. We conducted a qualitative analysis of student voluntary nominations for a teaching award and comparing frequency of themes

¹ Alhija (2017) did not identify which specific disciplines were included in each category.

derived from this analysis. Finally, we compared the outcome of this approach to defining teaching effectiveness to approaches used by others.

Method

Augusta University, formed by the consolidation of a health sciences university and a regional comprehensive university, consists of ten colleges. Five focus on education in the liberal arts and sciences (Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; Business; Computer and Cyber Science; Education; Science and Mathematics), and five train health science professionals, primarily at the post-baccalaureate level (Allied Health, Nursing, Dental, Medical, Graduate School). Of the approximately 9000 students enrolled, 60% are undergraduates, 19% are graduate students; and 21% are students in the health professions.²

The nomination process for the Caught in the Act of Great Teaching Award comprised writing a paragraph of no more than one hundred words describing an act of exemplary teaching by a faculty member.³ From Fall 2012 to Spring 2016, 176 students submitted nominations for the award. There were 107 nominations for instructors who taught primarily in the liberal arts and sciences; 69 nominations were for instructors who taught primarily in the health sciences. Since the nomination process did not require that the nominator provide any identifying information, we were unable to capture any demographic information on the students who submitted nominations. We determined the origin/department of the nominee by searching university records. Faculty members who taught in departments in the medical college, allied health sciences, nursing, and dentistry were considered health professions faculty.

Our analysis included both qualitative and quantitative approaches. We answered the question about what students consider exemplary teaching by seeking consistent themes through a content analysis of the nominations. We examined differences between students in the two educational contexts with quantitative analysis of differences in frequencies of nominations.

Coding Nominations

Through an inductive iterative process, 10 themes were identified based on students' nominations. These themes represent the commonalities found within the over 400 codes developed from student nominations. First, all nominations were de-identified, so that the nominator and nominee were unknown to the coders. The three researchers then read nominations independently and identified a word or phrase that characterized essential components of the nomination. One nomination could include multiple codes. (No limit was placed on the number of themes at this point.) Eleven themes emerged when the researchers initially shared their lists of possible themes and identified similarities.

The researchers then created descriptions (see Table 1) to clarify the themes and provide coding guidelines. During the coding process, each coder reviewed nominations and referred to the guidelines to select themes. A nomination needed to include only one aspect of the theme described in the coding guidelines to be identified for that theme. To evaluate consistency of coding, 30 nominations were randomly selected for independent coding. The coders then met to compare results and to discuss inconsistencies in assigning themes. This phase also involved updating the coding guidelines to better distinguish among themes.

² The graduate student category consists of students in the liberal arts, sciences, business, and education. Health professions students may be either graduate or undergraduate.

³ For further information see Bledsoe and Richardson (2016).

The nominations were then split into three groups. Each coder independently coded two groups of nominations, so that each group was coded by two independent coders. They agreed on the presence of a theme in 85.79% of the codes; disagreements were resolved by discussion to consensus. The Thorough category was removed from subsequent analysis because of its very low frequency of occurrence in the data set ($n = 4$).

Table 1: Theme Coding Guidelines.

Theme	Theme description
Care	Instructor cares about student as a person, treats students as adults, respects the students.
Challenge	Instructor challenges students to learn.
Expert	Instructor is expert in the discipline, has extensive content knowledge
Above and Beyond	Instructor is hard-working or goes “above and beyond.”
Engaging	Instructor engages students in learning activities, is fun, or is not boring. Instructor creates engaging atmosphere, positive learning environment, or an atmosphere conducive to learning.
Enthusiasm	Instructor expresses enthusiasm, passion, or loves teaching.
Model	Instructor serves as mentor, role model, models professionalism, or is identified as an excellent professional.
Approachable	Instructor is accessible to students, welcoming, open, or makes the students feel comfortable about the class or learning.
Pedagogy	Instructor incorporates activities that extend knowledge; course design; teaching intentionally; or specific teaching behavior.
Student success	Instructor cares about student success or supports student learning. This theme does not include the instructor being passionate about teaching.
Thorough	Instructor encourages deep learning (removed from final analysis).

Results

A total of 440 codes was identified from the 176 nominations, with 252 describing faculty members from the liberal arts and sciences and 188 describing faculty members from the health professions. The researchers identified an average of 2.5 ($SD = 1.21$) codes per nomination.

Themes

Student success. The most frequent theme was Student Success (48.3%), which was defined as caring about student learning and achievement. In this case, the nominators valued instructors who

seemed to care about students learning and achieving success in their courses and their professions. For example, one student said that “[the instructor] isn’t focused on how well we do on a test but rather on how well we become nurses.” Students also reported that having a professor who cares about their success inspires them to work harder: “Dr. X’s desire to see me succeed inspires me to continue to strive to achieve my dream of being a clinical psychologist.”

*Above and Beyond.*⁴ 36.9% of the nominations that provided examples of acts that “go above and beyond” general expectations noted the willingness of instructors to work longer or harder or outside of “regular” hours to ensure student learning. One student reported that “She [the instructor] dedicates a great deal of her time running extra help sessions, working one-on-one with students, and organizing interactive modules that greatly broaden our experiences.” Another stated that they “never had a teacher go to such great length,” and reported their teacher “went out of his way to help me He sat down with me for an hour out of his day and really thought out how he could help me.” Another reported that the faculty member: “contacted the financial aid office to help resolve stressful delays and communication breakdowns [on behalf of a student], and kept the student abreast of her actions and progress.”

Pedagogy. Nominations also focused on pedagogy, especially approaches and activities that foster student learning (35.2%). Students reported that they benefited from pedagogical techniques that incorporated real world application, fostered discussion, or organized content for learning. For example, one student noted how illustrations helped to organize information, reporting that “He draws diagrams and pictures to help his explanations and asks questions to encourage students to help formulate plans and be more involved in patient care.” Another student recognized that the instructor had developed strategies to help organize the information, noting that “She has also mastered the use of instructional cues – she clarified and emphasized key points and used charts to organize the topic.” Nominators mentioned a variety of activities, such as those packed into this one nomination: The instructor makes “lectures come alive through the use of simulation, games, and media to prevent boredom and provide clarity. For example, while teaching a group of nursing students about care of cardiac patients, she used a variety of teaching strategies dividing the class into groups and using a cardiac jeopardy game combined with hands on skills and lecture for active participation and enjoyable learning.”

Engaging. Acts that engaged students in learning were mentioned in 34.7% of the nominations. The description of acts for this theme emphasized the extent to which the instructor’s behavior or specific activities generated and maintained student interest during the learning process. Making classes “enjoyable,” “fun,” “interesting,” “engaging,” and “fascinating” were recurrent descriptors for this theme. The engagement included intellectual as well as emotional stimulation—“Each day of class, students are mesmerized by this professor’s artfulness at creating an intellectually charged atmosphere.” This theme often focused on how a positive atmosphere is conducive to learning, and that engaging learning experiences help students remember the content—“This is an activity students talk about and remember for years.”

Care. Caring for and respecting students as multi-dimensional human beings was identified in 26.1% of the nominations. Care was evidenced by instructors’ availability for personal contact—“X is the kind of professor you can talk to on and off campus about anything He is not only there for school, but he is someone to talk to and someone to trust”—and by demonstration of concern for students’ personal issues—“[This instructor] helped me get through classes when I’ve gone through some of the roughest patches in my life.” Expressions of appreciation that instructors seemed to respect students were also included in this category – “We value the way that she respects our education, our opinions, and never minimizes our contributions in clinic.”

⁴ This theme was identified as “Extra” during the coding process.

*Approachable.*⁵ A notable percentage of students (17.6%) perceived openness—a general sense of approachability and availability—as a quality associated with acts of exemplary teaching. Nominations that identified instructors as “approachable,” “accessible,” “available,” and “willing to help” were identified as representing this theme. For example, one nomination reported that the instructor “is never too busy for her students.” Nominations that mentioned that instructors offered direct assistance to students—“Without her assistance, I do not think I would have been able to complete the thesis process with the success that I did”—were also considered to represent the Approachable theme. Another nomination indicated that the instructor was “ALWAYS patient and willing to explain any question.” Instructor availability to students was coded for this theme as well— “[He] made himself more available than any other professor that I’ve had.”

Enthusiasm. Enthusiasm was a marker for 17.6% of students who described the professor’s passion for teaching. Common descriptors in this category included “excited,” “passionate,” “energetic,” and “enjoys teaching.” Some nominations that represented this theme specifically mentioned the instructor’s enthusiasm about teaching—“Professor X’s enthusiasm for delivering the course content is evident by the way she covers the material.” Other nominations for this theme noted passion for the content of the discipline—X is “very passionate about his subject, which motivates students to perform well on assignments and exams.”

Model. Students valued acts that reflected the professionalism of their instructors and their ability to serve as role models (17%). Some common descriptors coded in the Model theme were “mentor,” “role model,” “guide,” and “exemplary.” Nominations that included this theme often noted that the instructor demonstrated the skills and characteristics important for the profession or discipline—“X exemplifies the teacher/clinician in its best form, always having the time to teach young minds clinical skills even within the pressure of clinical work demands.” Nominations that identified instructors as mentors were coded for this theme as well—“X is a fantastic teacher and mentor.”

Challenge. Some students (9.1%) reported acts that involved presenting challenges to learners. These students noted that they often learned more when their teachers challenged them—the class “was very difficult, but I learned more that semester than I have learned in the past 3 years of being in college.” Other nominations that represented this theme noted that challenging instructors garnered respect from students—the instructor “has earned the respect of all her students by challenging us and treating us as future colleagues.”

Expert. Some students (7.4%) considered an instructor’s expertise. These nominations typically identified the instructor as possessing advanced knowledge in their field—“He demonstrates the utmost knowledge in his field.” Nominations in this category also recognized extensive experience of instructors—“Dr. X is an outstanding educator who effectively integrates her 25 years of clinical experience into the classroom setting.”

Differences between teaching contexts

We conducted *t* – tests to determine if the number of codes per nomination varied by teaching context. Number of codes in nominations of faculty who taught students in the health professions were slightly greater ($M = 2.72$; $SD = 1.28$) than number of codes per nomination of instructors who taught students in the liberal arts and sciences ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 1.51$), $t(174) = -1.99$, $p = .048$.

We conducted chi-square analyses to compare frequency of themes for the two contexts. As revealed in Table 2, several themes varied significantly by teaching context. Acts of instructors in the health professions were more likely to be considered as contributing to *student success*, to be *above and*

⁵ This theme was labelled as “Open” during the coding process.

beyond the expected, and to *challenge* learners than acts of instructors in liberal arts and sciences disciplines. Acts of instructors in liberal arts and sciences were considerably more likely to be identified as *engaging* than were the acts of health professions' instructors.

Table 2. Frequency of nominations including each theme overall and by teaching context.

Theme	Overall		Undergraduate		Health Professions		Chi-Square Results		% Difference between AS and HP	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	χ^2	<i>phi</i>	UG>HP	HP>UG
Student Success	48.3	1	38.3	2	63.8	1	9.89*	.25		25.5
Above and Beyond	36.9	2	29.9	4	47.8	2	5.04*	.18		17.9
Pedagogy	35.2	3	34.6	3	36.2	3	.00	.02		1.6
Engaging	34.7	4	43.9	1	20.3	6	9.33*	-.24	23.6	
Care	26.1	5	28	5	23.2	4.5	.29	-.05	4.8	
Approachable	17.6	6.5	20.6	6	13	9	1.16	.10	7.6	
Enthusiasm	17.6	6.5	17.8	7	17.4	7	.00	-.01	.04	
Model	17.0	8	13.1	8	23.2	4.5	2.36	.13		10.1
Challenge	9.1	9	4.7	9.5	15.9	8	5.15*	.19		11.2
Expert	7.4	10	4.7	9.5	11.6	10	2.01	.16		6.9

Note: * $p < .05$.

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to determine students' perceptions of exemplary teaching through a qualitative analysis of nominations for a teaching award. The four most frequently identified themes all addressed student learning. These nominations addressed instructor concern for student success and learning (Student Success), teaching techniques and behaviors (Pedagogy), instructors working especially hard to support student learning (Above and Beyond), and engaging students in learning activities (Engaging). One other theme, Challenge, was mentioned less frequently but also addressed instructor emphasis on student learning.

Students also valued a socioemotional connection to their instructors, evidenced in themes of respecting students and caring for them as a person (Care) and accessibility and approachability (Approachable). Finally, characteristics of the instructor were mentioned in a number of nominations; students reported instructor professionalism and mentorship (Model), love of teaching (Enthusiasm), and content knowledge (Expert).

Comparing Nominations between Contexts

As discussed above, a comparison of the ranking of the themes when these are divided between those expressed in nominations for faculty in the liberal arts and sciences and those in the health professions shows considerable overlap. There are, however, two themes that were ranked notably differently. Engaging, ranked 4th overall, was ranked 1st for faculty in the liberal arts and sciences and 6th for faculty in the health professions. On the other hand, while Model was ranked 8th overall and for liberal arts

and sciences faculty members, it was tied for 4th in nominations for health sciences faculty members. A closer examination of the rankings may help explain this.

When one examines the percentage difference for each theme between the two contexts, an interesting pattern emerges (cf. the last two columns of Table 2). While Enthusiasm and Pedagogy are ranked similarly, faculty members in the liberal arts and sciences are nominated more in categories that stress socioemotional components of student-instructor interactions, such as Engaging, Approachable, and Care, while nominations for faculty members in the health professions emphasize the extent to which they are committed to student success and give time and effort beyond that anticipated. The nominations of health sciences faculty members also placed value on expertise and modeling professionalism. These findings are consistent with those of Al-Mohaimed and Khan (2014), who note that medical students valued characteristics related to performance rather than personality. A look at the Model and Expert themes, which were low in overall rank but held more significance for health science faculty members, may help us understand why this is the case.

Nominations coded for Expert most often referred to disciplinary knowledge and expertise, albeit this was frequently tied to the ability to impart that knowledge to others. The Model nominations often considered the nominees within a context of professionalism; however, there were subtle differences between the two contexts. Those for faculty members in the liberal arts and sciences often invoked the idea of the faculty member as a model teacher, and over 60% of the nominations also referenced the themes of Student Success and/or Above and Beyond. Half of the liberal arts and sciences nominations that mentioned Model described the nominee as a mentor offering guidance in education and life in general.

The health science nominations coded with Model as a theme also generally coded for Student Success and Above and Beyond. However, instructors acted as models in two ways: as teachers and as clinicians. Intriguingly, 46% of the health science nominations coded for Model also cited the faculty member's enthusiasm, while none of the liberal arts and sciences nominations mentioned both. The health science nominations that coded for both Model and Enthusiasm often noted a passion for teaching and the profession in combination with, as one nomination put it, "kindness [and] genuine affect" in dealing with students and patients. This focus on the affective aspects of professional behavior may account for the infrequent combination of nominations with both Expert and Model as codes. (Fourteen percent of the nominations coded with Model also coded for Expert.). Therefore, while students of liberal arts and sciences faculty members may tend to see faculty members primarily as teachers, students of health science faculty members see their instructors primarily as practitioners who model professional deportment and combine this with an enthusiasm for training others to enter the field. The two groups of faculty seem to be conceptualized differently and consequently are valued for different aspects of their interactions with students.

The differences noted above likely reflect differences in both students' expectations and the context of teaching and learning. The context of learning in the health profession disciplines often involves bedside or hands-on teaching and a focus on the development of professional skills and attitudes. Health science faculty members who were nominated for the award appeared to be primarily from the medical college, and some of the nominations came from medical residents, whose training occurs in the workplace. The nominations addressing student success, extra effort to assure students pass exams or develop as professionals, and challenging learning are consistent with this teaching and learning context. Several of the nominations mentioned appreciation for instructors taking time after a long day of patient care to stop and counsel them or to help them learn difficult material.

The appreciation of extra effort on the part of health professions faculty members also likely reflects the perception of those faculty members as practitioners for whom teaching is a secondary role. Indeed, differences did come out in the types of activities that were coded Above and Beyond. A significant number of health science nominations mentioned time the faculty spent preparing course

materials and slide presentations, conveying difficult material comprehensibly, arranging additional study sessions or the posting of additional resources within the course management system. For instance, one nomination highlighted the extra time the instructor spent “making sure students understand what is expected and providing clear explanations, guidance, and just in general spending many afterhours and weekends preparing things for the students.” Nominations of liberal arts and sciences faculty members more frequently mentioned advising activities outside the classroom and individual interventions, not only to improve student learning but also to help students be prepared to learn. Again, this attentiveness to the socioemotional aspects was common throughout, but for the liberal arts and sciences, it was often at a more basic human level than in the nominations in the health sciences. This difference reinforces the idea that the two groups may conceptualize their instructors differently.

Additionally, differences between health professions students and liberal arts and sciences students may also help to explain the differences we have identified. Academic programs in the health professions are typically quite selective; their students are a carefully selected group of highly motivated students. Those students are typically focused on developing a specific set of skills that will allow them to succeed in their chosen profession. Thus, they are especially likely to value instructors who are also concerned with their success, who challenge them to learn, and who are willing to exert extra effort to assure their success. As highly motivated students, they are also less likely to consider that a positive learning atmosphere or engaging activities (Engaging) are important for their success in their future career. The different conceptualizations and expectations of instruction and instructors present a rich field for further study and comparative research.

Comparison to Previous Findings

Our final goal was to determine how closely the themes that emerged from this study matched previous research. Thus, we compared our finding to those from other schemes (Alhija, 2017; Buskist et al., 2002; Catano & Harvey, 2011; Cohen, 1981; Fulton, 1996; Hativa et al., 2001; Marsh & Roche, 1997; Onwegbuzie et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2013). The comparison of the themes to those in the nine other schemes indicates considerable overlap. Pedagogy, Engaging, Care, and Enthusiasm are mentioned as characteristics in at least seven other schemes, and Student Success, Challenge, Expert and Approachable have at least five mentions. Thus, most of the themes we identified among the student nominations were similar to those identified in previous research and hint at a core set of behaviors and qualities that students associate with exemplary teaching.

Since terminology varies widely, themes were considered a match when their descriptions contained significant elements in common. The extent of the overlap is difficult to quantify more exactly, because, while the comparison of the themes to those in the nine other schemes indicates considerable overlap, alignment does not mean that the terms are congruent. For instance, Alhija’s dimension “teaching methods” includes “teaching in an interesting and fascinating manor (sic)” as one of fourteen items and “goals to be achieved” includes “Stimulating motivation and interest in the course subject” as one of its five elements (2017, p. 8). Both of these are captured in our Engaging category.

Considering the difficulties in aligning categories between schemes, it may be more helpful to consider some of the distinct differences between previous work and our findings. For example, Challenge and Expert were low in our ranking but were noted in 5 other schemes. Above and Beyond was the second most frequently cited characteristic in our study, yet only two other schemes included it. Model was not found in the other schemes.

Content knowledge and subject matter expertise, which we captured in Expert, are ranked highly in other schemes but found little resonance in our study. This difference may be due at least

in part to the nature of the nominations. The call for nominations specifically targeted “great acts” of teaching, which likely led to descriptions of behaviors that were perceived as exceeding expectations rather than embodying effective teaching. For most nominators, the instructor’s content knowledge may have been a given that did not deserve mention. The relative popularity of the Above and Beyond theme in our study may also be attributed in part to the nature of the nomination process, which asked students to nominate faculty for “great acts.”

The Challenge theme is also found frequently in other schemes. Unlike Expert, however, it is assigned less importance by students in various rankings. For instance, while in Buskist et al. (2002) faculty ranked “promotes critical thinking” third out of 28 items, it was one of the four items tied for 23rd in the student rankings. Therefore, the low ranking by students in our study is not incongruent. The nature of the data may play a role here also. Nominations often cited an instructor’s ability to make difficult material comprehensible or work with the student until it had been comprehended. This implies that the course included challenging material, but this was not articulated explicitly.

Limitations

We were unable to collect background information on nominators, so we were unable to determine whether students’ conceptions of exemplary acts of teaching differed according to demographic characteristics such as age, race, or gender. Similarly, demographic information on the instructors was not collected. The nominations were a response to a single prompt, limited in length and gathered from a single institution. They also captured specific acts that students saw as extraordinary and so are neither representative nor normative and do not coalesce into a definition of exemplary teaching. Furthermore, although the results of our study share considerable similarities with other research aimed at describing exemplary teaching, since the nominations were gathered at one institution, it is unclear if the results could be extended to other institutions and instructional contexts.

Implications

These findings have implications for evaluation of faculty work. By showing that faculty in the liberal arts and sciences and those in the health sciences were valued for somewhat different qualities, this study adds to recent work (e.g., Hativa et al., 2001; Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006; Neumann, 2001) that emphasizes differences among disciplines in approaches to teaching and confirms Alhija’s (2017) finding that students’ conceptions of good teaching varied by discipline. Although the differences between the two contexts were not large and the overall rankings of the themes was similar across health professions and liberal arts and sciences contexts, the differences in value attached to Student Success, Engaging, and Model are an indication that, as we strive to define exemplary teaching, we need to remain aware of the multiple factors involved in the teaching context that influence which traits and specific behaviors will be considered significant and to develop models that allow for flexibility and variation. Furthermore, the distinctions within the institution reinforce the need to consider different evaluative instruments both within and between institutions, despite the additional burden that will place on those individuals who develop and validate the instruments.

In addition, a significant number of the nominations mentions acts that institutional evaluations of faculty often capture inadequately (especially in the Above and Beyond category). The nominations describe acts that take place outside the formal classroom, on the “edges” of the primary educational experience—such as working with students when they are neither currently enrolled in a class or designated advisees, and helping students negotiate problems, such as financial and personal exigencies, that erode students’ preparedness and motivation to learn. The issue of mentorship also is often on the margins of our evaluative processes. Since students clearly place a high value on these

activities and research on the positive effects of student-faculty contact is strong (Chambliss & Takacs, 2018; Cuseo, 2018), mechanisms should be developed for capturing, assessing, and rewarding these activities and accounting for them in faculty workload.

This study raises other issues that deserve further attention. While other studies have included professionalism as a category of exemplary teaching, the focus has primarily been on the deportment and appearance of the instructor (e.g., Buskist, et al., 2002). The idea captured in the current study as Model, i.e., of the faculty member as a role model and a mentor, has generally not been captured in schemes describing teaching excellence. It would be informative to determine if this quality is important primarily in health professional programs as was the case here, or if it also emerges with students enrolled in majors leading to professional degrees, such as Education, Engineering, and Business. Alternatively, perhaps the theme emerges as students start to take more courses in their major and identify themselves with a discipline regardless of its professional culture. This is a direction for further research.

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