

## Editorial

# @ Our Wit's End with Unprofessional Student E-mails

Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO



Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO

Traditionally, out-of-class communication between students and faculty involved meetings during office hours or informal meetings. These meetings have been shown to contribute to a positive student outcome.<sup>1-3</sup> Today, e-mail communication between students and faculty is common at all levels of education. It provides students with a convenient and efficient method of interacting with faculty outside of class and can be a means of discussing information they may not feel comfortable discussing face-to-face. However, e-mail communication differs from face-to-face communication because it does not allow the participants to clarify information on-the-spot or to interpret nonverbal cues and feedback. Stephens et al. identified that overly casual e-mails from students to instructors created a less than positive attitude toward the message and significantly impacted student credibility and an instructor's willingness to comply with a simple request for a face-to-face meeting.<sup>4</sup>

### Faculty are Inundated

According to the New York Times, student e-mails that are unprofessional with regard to etiquette, grammar and content are overwhelming faculty.<sup>5</sup> Attributes of unprofessional e-mails include an inappropriate salutation such as "hey," use of first names, or use of Mr./Miss./Ms. Other contributors to unprofessional e-mails are poor grammar, lack of capitalization, inappropriate abbreviations, lack of subject line information, no signature, grade-begging, negotiating work assignments, or an unprofessional tone. Studies have indicated that grade-begging — asking for a higher grade without a legitimate reason — occurs more frequently in e-mails than in face-to-face meetings.<sup>6,7</sup>



Table 1. [Click to enlarge](#)

Anecdotal reports from faculty in optometric education confirm they are receiving a large amount of unprofessional e-mails. Recently, I received an e-mail from a student that referred to me as "Mrs. Denial" and included "Im having trouble with a topic u covered in class. Can u meet at 11 tomorrow." I've had students use idk (I don't know) in an e-mail to me as well. In another example, a student contacted me with a legitimate concern about a quiz taken with the college's learning management system. I was sympathetic to the concern until I read the last sentence of the e-mail: "if this issue is not resolved I will have to take it to a higher power." I'm not sure if the student would have used the same phrase in a face-to-face meeting, but my level of sympathy towards the student changed immediately.

### Generational or Not, Inappropriate E-mail is Unacceptable

Can generational differences account for the unprofessional nature of students' e-mails? Perhaps the issues are related to the types of expectations held by Millennial students, which include a quick

response, the right to have a voice, informality, negotiation, and the use of titles as inauthentic.<sup>8</sup> It's worth asking, too, whether students ever formally learn how to compose an e-mail. One might assume that most students learn informally and from e-mailing peers. Aguilar-Roca et al. studied whether a two-minute training class significantly increased the use of professional e-mails in student-to-faculty correspondence.<sup>7</sup> The study demonstrated "a significant increase in overall professional quality of student e-mails in the trained class due to more frequent use of proper salutations, appropriate capitalization and a class-specific subject line."<sup>7</sup> However, no difference was detected in professional content or grade-begging between the trained and untrained group.<sup>7</sup>

Unprofessional e-mails should not be tolerated by faculty. Discussing unprofessional e-mails with students can help to alter the behavior. A plethora of websites offer tips for composing professional e-mails. **(Table 1)** Faculty often include these guidelines in course syllabi. Providing students with some common-sense tips may help to guide them toward more professional e-mailing and maintaining a positive relationship with faculty.

I welcome optometric faculty and administrators to share their experiences and ideas on this important topic.

## References

1. Dobransky ND, Frymier AB. Developing teacher-student relationships through out of class communication. *Communication Quarterly*. 2004 May;52(3)211-223.
2. Jaasma MA, Koper RJ. Out-of-class communication between female and male students and faculty: the relationship to student perceptions of instructor immediacy. *Women's Studies in Communication*. 2002 Nov;25(1)119-137.
3. Martin MM, Myers SA. Students' communication traits and their out-of-class communication with their Instructors. *Communication Research Reports*. 2006 Dec;23(4)283-289.
4. Stephens K, Houser ML, Cowan RL. R U able to meet me: the impact of students' overly casual e-mail messages to instructors. *Communication Education*. 2009;58(3):303-326.
5. Glater JD. To: professor@university.edu Subject: why it's all about me. *The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 2006.
6. Jones S, Johnson-Yale C. Professors online: the Internet's impact on college faculty. *First Monday*. 2005 Sept 5;10(9). Available from: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1275/1195>.
7. Aguilar-Roca N, Williams A, Warrior R, O'Dowd D. Two-minute training in class significantly increases the use of professional formatting in student to faculty e-mail correspondence. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. 2009;3(1). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2009.030115>.
8. Espinoza C. Millennial values and boundaries in the classroom. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*. 2012;2012(131):29-41. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/tl.20025>.

Dr. Denial [[deniala@neco.edu](mailto:deniala@neco.edu)], Editor of *Optometric Education*, is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Primary Care at the New England College of Optometry and a Clinical Instructor at a community health center in Boston.

## Industry News