

Editorial

Student Academic Entitlement

Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO, DAAO (OE)



Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO, DAAO (OE)

How often have we had a student ask that a grade close to a cutoff be bumped up, request the rescheduling of an exam or quiz for personal events (non-medical or non-emergency) or request that personal effort be taken into consideration when grading? Who has not experienced an attitude from some students that attending class, turning in homework and completing reading assignments should dictate at least a passing grade, independent of quality of the work?

When Greenberger et al. surveyed 466 undergraduate students in 2008, they found that 66% of them agreed “If I have explained to my professor that I am trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my course grade”; 41% agreed “If I have completed most of the reading for a class, I deserve a B in that course”; 34% agreed “If I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a grade of B”; 31% agreed “Teachers often give me lower grades than I deserve on paper assignments”; and 30% agreed “Professors who won’t let me take an exam at a different time because of my personal plans(e.g. a vacation or other trip that is important to me) are too strict.”¹

Student academic entitlement can be frustrating and emotionally draining for faculty. It takes time and energy away from teaching. Also, college and university administrators can play a significant role in supporting faculty or propagating student behavior.

A recent article published by The New York Times reported that a respected organic chemistry professor at New York University (NYU) was dismissed after 82 of his 350 students signed a petition against him.² The petition stated, “We are very concerned about our scores, and find that they are not an accurate reflection of the time and effort put into this class,” and “We urge you to realize that a class with such a high percentage of withdrawals and low grades has failed to make students’ learning and well-being a priority and reflects poorly on the chemistry department as well as the institution as a whole.”² The professor had previously taught organic chemistry at an Ivy League university for many years, written a text book on the subject and created new learning modalities that focused on problem-solving rather

than memorization. Many students supported the professor and found him very likable. The university cited poor course evaluations for the professor and complaints about his tone as condescending and demanding as support for the firing. However, the professor taught at NYU for longer than a decade until the petition surfaced. What message does the NYU decision send to students and junior or adjunct faculty?

Student entitlement can be defined as a “tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success.”³ Researches have often viewed entitlement as a component of narcissism.⁴ Entitlement includes the concept of the world or society owing the individual something, meeting wants immediately and the bending or dismissal of rules.^{5,6} Entitlement has often been linked to customer-business or citizen-government models.⁷ These models lead to the student as a consumer and the grade or degree as a product that can be purchased rather than earned.⁷ End-of-course student evaluations often empower entitled students. These evaluations can often impact junior faculty, non-tenured faculty or adjunct faculty.

As a faculty member, I recognize that most of our students are hard workers who want to learn and master course material. They are conscientious and caring student clinicians who take responsibility for patient care very seriously. These students understand the concept of lifelong learning and the ethical responsibility of a healthcare provider to stay current with medical or optometric knowledge. However, it is hard to ignore the growing number of academically entitled students who seem to be oblivious to the harm that can come from this mindset and behavior. In my experience, over the years, student academic entitlement has grown. Students with entitlement characteristics have become more vocal and active. How can faculty respond?

The Syllabus⁸

Present clear expectations and guidelines in the syllabus and do not waiver from syllabus content. The syllabus is a powerful tool that sets the goals and expectations for the course. It contains material that outlines the course goals, objectives, topical areas, schedules and, most importantly, the rules for success in the course. This may include rules on grading, curving scores, consequence of late assignments, borderline grades, the use of make-up or extra credit assignments and classroom etiquette (use of cell phones, tardiness, attendance, use of electronic devices in class). Developing a student entitlement-proof syllabus requires the exquisite anticipation of all prospective scenarios. I am still amazed at the number of students who approach me with “I know what it says in the syllabus, but can I have (fill in the blank).” Wavering from the syllabus opens a Pandora’s box and there is no turning back. It can set a precedent and make it difficult for other faculty to strictly adhere to their course syllabus. Faculty who adhere to the syllabus may then be perceived as too strict and not flexible. Students who are following the syllabus may perceive the wavering as unfair. Extenuating circumstances may require flexibility, but this should be rare and on an individual basis. Not wavering from the syllabus is essential but challenging to execute.¹

Open Discussion³

Engaging students in an open discussion about entitlement may also be useful. Students who have grown up in a culture of entitlement may not realize the detrimental effects it can have on learning. There may be a disconnect between a student’s past experiences and current expectations. Extra-credit assignments, curving exam scores, retaking exams and giving credit for effort not results can lead to grade inflation. The achieving of a higher grade than what is actually earned devalues the course grade, a degree and potentially compromises the integrity of a program.¹ Additionally, it’s not fair to the students who actually learned the course material.

Administrative Support

Administrative support is essential. Department chairs, academic deans, presidents and provosts need to support faculty. The administration is often in a difficult position. Administration as well as faculty want students to have a positive experience and look back favorably on the institution. This can impact future applicants, who may rely on student blogs, reviews or social media as well as alumni support. However, propagating student entitlement is a disservice to the institution, students and the profession. As institutions, we have an ethical responsibility to graduate students who have mastered a required curriculum.

References

1. Greenberger E, Lessard Jared, Chuansheng C, Farruggia S. Self-entitled college students: contributions of personality, parenting, and motivational factors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 2008 Jan;37(10):1193-1204.
2. Saul S. N.Y.U. Students Were Failing Class. The Professor Lost His Job [Internet]. New York, NY: The New York Times Company; c2022 [cited 12 Oct 2022]. Available from: link.gale.com/apps/doc/A720727395/SPJ.SP24?u=mlln_b_nengcoll&sid=bookmark-SPJ.SP24&xid=99cd7153.
3. Weimer M. Student Entitlement: Key Questions and Short Answers [Internet]. *Faculty Focus*; c2022 [cited 2022 Oct 14] Available from: <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/student-entitlement-key-questions-short-answers/>.
4. Campbell WK, Bonacci AM, Shelton J, Exline JJ, Bushman BJ. Psychological entitlement: interpersonal consequences and validation of a self-report measure. *J Pers Assess*. 2004 Aug;83(1):29-45.
5. Glater JD. To: Professor@University.edu Subject: Why It's All About Me [Internet]. New York, NY: The New York Times Company; c2022 [cited 25 Oct 2022]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/21/education/to-professoruniversityedu-subject-why-its-all-about-me.html>.
6. Lippmann S, Bulanda RE, Wagenaar TC. Student entitlement: issues and strategies for confronting entitlement in the classroom and beyond. *College Teaching*. 2009;57(4):197-204.
7. Schaefer T, Barta M, Whitley W, Stogsdill M. The you owe me! mentality: a student entitlement perception paradox. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*. 2013 Spring;9(1):p79-91.
8. Holdcroft B. Student Incivility, Intimidation, and Entitlement in Academia [Internet]. Washington, DC: American Association of University Professors; [cited 2022 Oct 14]. Available from: <https://www.aaup.org/article/student-incivility-intimidation-and-entitlement-academia#.Y0mvoHbMI2x>.

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