

## Editorial

# It is Time to Take a Hard Look at Student Entitlement

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In my tenure as Editor of *Optometric Education*, I have never been as compelled to pursue a topic in this editorial as I am to pursue the topic of student academic entitlement. Since my [previous editorial](#) on the subject,<sup>1</sup> I have spoken with numerous faculty and administrators in various graduate and undergraduate settings who overwhelmingly expressed frustration and anger about the issue as well as their perception of a lack of administrative support.

### Causes and Effects

My previous editorial touched on several aspects of student entitlement, including how it has been defined, probable causes ? a repercussion of narcissism and a shift toward the idea of student as consumer ? and consequences.<sup>1</sup> To the list of potential causes, Rinsley adds the theory that entitlement is related to the failures of family, schools and government to prepare young people for the responsibilities of being part of a society and a result of growing threats to attaining future goals, diminishing purchasing power and uncertainties related to the environment, world stability or financial success.<sup>2</sup> These factors, he suggests, led to a model of instant gratification with a theme of “success without effort and income without productivity.”<sup>2</sup>

As far back as 1986, Dubovsky pointed to the student-as-consumer mindset when he reported what he observed as five features of entitlement in medical education: 1) “Knowledge is a right that should be delivered with minimal exertion and discomfort on the part of the consumer.” 2) “A passivity associated with the expectation that others will provide all the education that will be necessary.” 3) “Problems in learning are due to the inadequacies of the teacher, the course, the system, rather than the student’s own shortcomings.” 4) “One should receive equal recognition and reward regardless of individual effort and ability.” 5) “The entitled student is justified in feeling good by making others feel bad, for example by

addressing grievances through hostile and disrespectful behavior. Discussion of the student's behavior is thought to generate stress."<sup>3</sup>

Others have described the student/consumer concept as a belief held by some students that because they are paying for their education, they deserve to be treated as consumers.<sup>4,5</sup> Further, as consumers, they expect to be able to participate in the education process according to their preferences and be catered to.<sup>5</sup>

The negative effects of student entitlement are many and include grade inflation, disruptive student behavior in the classroom, faculty changing their teaching methods in ways they would rather not, and decreased faculty morale.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, students' expectation of personal excellence may decline, especially if it involves personal sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> This is compounded by the avoidance of any situation perceived as difficult or anxiety-producing.<sup>3</sup>

I have personally encountered student entitlement several times in the past year. On multiple occasions, students who had missed a deadline and consequently lost points emailed me to explain and request the points. While their emails were respectful and polite, and I was sympathetic to their circumstances, I explained why it was important to stick to the criteria outlined in the syllabus. The repeated emails and personal requests made the temptation to concede difficult to resist. Frankly, the situation felt emotionally exhausting.

### **How Can We Approach the Current Reality?**

I found Dubovsky's 1986 description of student entitlement applicable to today. It is interesting that he reported on student entitlement that long ago, yet most of the recently published papers on the subject associate its characteristics with the Millennial generation (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2010). In 1986, Millennials were very young or not born. It may be that changes in the world and in academia have empowered students in ways not possible in the 80s, making our experience with entitlement more pronounced. Technology, which enables on-demand communication, information and social connectivity, has likely contributed to the desire for instant gratification and made the entitlement mindset more common. Also, tuition at colleges and graduate schools has increased, and many institutions are tuition-dependent. In many instances, previous education experiences have set a precedent of supporting student demands, which further enables entitlement.

While it is potentially informative to ponder how the problem rose to this level, the reality is we must deal with the current cohort of students who have a growing sense of academic entitlement. Certainly paying tuition does not buy students the right to dictate to faculty and administrators the course of the education experience and ultimate granting of a degree. Faculty and administrators should be viewed as the experts in both the content and delivery of education. But why do faculty and administrators feel pressure to give way to the demands of entitled students? In addition to the emotional stress, faculty face the threat of unwarranted negative course evaluations from students, and administrators likely fear negative public reviews of their institutions and have concerns about the sustainability of programs and ability to recruit the most qualified students.

Students, most of whom take their responsibilities seriously, are an important source of information regarding their education experience. However, the view that anything that makes learning difficult is an unfair imposition should not be tolerated.<sup>3</sup> We need to find a way to support and work with students while maintaining a high level of expectations and requirements. Giving in to all student demands is not a responsible approach and sends a message that entitled attitudes and behavior are OK.

The journal welcomes hearing about your experiences with student academic entitlement and any recommendations you have for dealing with this important issue.

## References

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