

A discussion of student academic entitlement and possible strategies to mitigate the associated challenges

Abstract

Academic entitlement, students' expectations of un-deserved successes, is a growing concern among professors as it is becoming more prevalent in higher education. Academically entitled students typically have lower GPAs and are more dissatisfied with their classes. Our research explores techniques for mitigating the negative consequences associated with academically entitled students by integrating empowering leadership behaviors into the classroom. After sharing our preliminary research results, we will lead a discussion with participants identifying academic entitlement behaviors that are experienced in the classroom, discussing the risks associated with this type of behavior, and share useful strategies for mitigating the negative outcomes.

Keywords: Academic entitlement, Empowering leadership behavior, Student outcomes

Introduction

The purpose of this discussion is to share our research on academic entitlement and the role of empowering leadership as a starting point for a fruitful discussion on student academic entitlement. We will focus on the negative effects of academic entitlement, as well as some empowering leadership behaviors which may lessen the negative outcomes. In our discussion we will ask participants to contribute personal experiences with academically entitled students as well as techniques that have worked (or have not worked) for them when managing unrealistic student expectations. At the end of this session we will share our notes, highlighting the different types of academic entitlement that we (collectively) face as professors, as well as strategies for dealing with the associated challenges. This session is designed for anyone teaching in higher education. Some research shows that academic entitlement decreases with age, thus this session might be most useful for professors teaching undergraduate courses.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Academic entitlement refers to students' beliefs that they deserve positive outcomes (i.e., grades) regardless of their effort or quality of work. Rooted in the theory of psychological entitlement, academic entitlement is defined as a student "tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success" (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 982). Students who are academically entitled believe they have the right to un-earned special treatment in class (Whately, Wasieleski, Breneiser, Wood, 2019). They are demanding and have an external locus of control, such that they blame their professors for any shortcomings in their academic performance.

AE relates negatively to both student performance and satisfaction. Academically entitled students tend to have lower GPAs. Moreover, students who are entitled tend to be less satisfied and more demanding of their instructors. They have high, often unrealistic expectations of their instructors. When these unrealistic expectations are not met, they are dissatisfied with the professor, which can be expressed in student evaluations and ultimately affect a professor's tenure, promotion, and merit decisions (Zhu & Anagondahilli, 2017).

With research to suggest that students are becoming more and more entitled as time goes on, we were interested in identifying factors that might mitigate the negative outcomes of AE. We explored empowering leadership behaviors as one such factor. Empowering leadership, which is well-established in the management literature, refers to, leaders sharing power in a way that increases follower intrinsic motivation (Srivastava, Bartol, Locke, 2006). We integrate the empowering leadership research into management education and suggest that professors can take on the role of an empowering leader. There are 5-facets of empowering leadership behavior, three of which we link theoretically to academic entitlement. First, leading by example which “refers to a set of behaviors that show the leader's commitment to his or her own work as well as the work of his/her team members” (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, p. 254). Second, coaching which “refers to a set of behaviors that educate team members and help them to become self-reliant” (Arnold et al., 2000, p. 255). Third, informing which “refers to the leader's dissemination of company wide information such as mission and philosophy as well as other important information” (Arnold et al., 2000, p.255).

With a sample of 241 students in 19 different classes, with 10 different instructors, we measured AE using an 8-item scale developed by Kopp, Zinn, Finney, and Jurich (2011). Sample items include, “If I don't do well on a test, the professor should make tests easier or curve

grades”, “If I am struggling in a class, the professor should approach me and offer to help”, “It is the professor’s responsibility to make it easy for me to succeed”, and “Because I pay tuition, I deserve passing grades.” Empowering leadership behavior was measured using scales developed by Arnold et al. (2000). Sample items from the coaching, informing, and leading by examples include, “my instructor suggests ways to improve my work performance”, “my instructor explains his/her decisions and actions to students”, and “my instructor sets a good example by the way he/she behaves”, respectively.

Our preliminary results indicate that the negative relationship between entitlement and course grade was lessened when instructors engaged in coaching (i.e. feedback) behaviors and informed students of class policies and expectations with clarity. Moreover, we found that the negative effect between AE and student satisfaction was lessened when instructors led by example, by working hard and having high performance expectations of themselves. Thus, professors can influence the extent to which academic entitlement is an issue among their students.

This research contributes to effective management teaching by integrating the empowering leadership behavior research into the management education literature and highlighting specific behaviors professors can engage in to minimize the negative effects of academic entitlement in the classroom. These behaviors, leading by example, coaching, and informing with clarity will be the starting point of a round table discussion.

Session Description

- Introduction of presenters and our research in general (5 minutes)
- Present this research and preliminary results (10-minutes)

- Discussion (40-minutes). Sample questions:
 - What types of academic entitlement have you dealt with? Can you share a specific story? (e.g., a time when students made unacceptable demands, unrealistic requests, or unjustified complaints)?
 - What are the risks for professors of students being academically entitled? (e.g., low student evaluations, temptation for grade inflation). Is this a concern? Is this worth exploring further? Is each generation really more entitled than the last?
 - What empowering leadership behaviors have you used in the classroom? Have any been effective at managing academic entitlement among students?
 - What else can we do? What strategies and techniques have you used that were effective at minimizing the effect of academic entitlement? What strategies do not work?
- Summary, Exchange contact information, Concluding remarks (5 minutes)

Reference List

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