

All-Knowing or All-Nurturing? Student Expectations, Gender Roles, and Practical Suggestions for Women in the Classroom*

Michelle Dion, Georgia Institute of Technology

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) often have important effects on promotion, tenure, and merit raises, even if only through the negative effects that poor evaluations can have on these decisions (Langbein 1994). SETs can be affected by student characteristics (class, GPA, major, expected grade, gender), class characteristics (size, required, discipline, quantitative), and professor characteristics (age, gender, race, ethnicity, personality traits).¹ Both experiments and analysis of end-of-semester SETs in a range of disciplines and institutional settings have been used to examine the effects of each of these characteristics and the interactions among them to understand the factors that produce higher SETs.

Though the evidence is mixed as to whether women on average receive lower SETs than men (Wigington, Tollefson, and Rodriguez 1989; Feldman 1993; Andersen and Miller 1997; Centra and Gaubatz 2000), most studies that examine the interaction between a professor's gender and other characteristics do find statistically significant effects of student, class type, or professor personality that differ by professor gender, regardless of academic discipline. For example, female instructors are likely to receive higher evaluations from female students than male students, while evaluations of male instructors vary little according to student gender (Feldman 1993; Basow 1995; 2000; Centra and Gaubatz 2000; Ory 2001). While students who expect lower grades in the course are likely to give a more negative evaluation of faculty teaching in general, this effect is more pronounced for female faculty (Langbein 1994).

Studies of SETs in a variety of disciplines and types of institutions find that students give higher ratings to faculty who meet the students' gender expectations and that most students expect faculty to engage in *both* typically male

(authoritative) and female (nurturing or caring) behaviors (Feldman 1993; Freeman 1994; Basow 2000). Authority may be projected by expertise or control, while nurturing may be conveyed through sympathy, support, or accessibility. Meanwhile, other studies suggest that female instructors who fail to conform to student expectations for women (i.e., the faculty are not perceived as nurturing, caring, or accessible) receive lower SETs (Bennett 1982; Andersen and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Baldwin and Blattner 2003).

Though most of the marginal effects of any one characteristic on SETs may be statistically significant but substantively small, a young woman of color asked to teach a large section of a required quantitative undergraduate course may find the deck stacked against her (Basow 1995). Collectively, the literature suggests that women must walk a fine line in the classroom between establishing their expertise and authority and meeting student expectations that women be more nurturing and supportive (Martin 1984). Women who are authoritative without being nurturing can be labeled cold (or worse) and disliked by students; women who are nurturing but do not establish sufficient authority can be judged unprofessional or unqualified (Statham, Richardson, and Cook 1991). Because students' gender expectations are more likely to affect their evaluations of female rather than male instructors, women, in particular, should be aware of how student expectations affect evaluations.

For better or worse, women find themselves in an academic culture that gives some weight to SETs, and until women are sufficiently represented in the tenured and administrative positions that determine the rules of the game, women must ensure that their SETs will not hurt their professional advancement. Female instructors, especially among junior faculty, can make strategic adjustments that may improve their SETs. Drawing upon the central insight of the literature on instructor gender and SETs—that students' gender expectations particularly shape their evaluations of female faculty—the remainder of the article suggests ways that female, and especially junior, faculty can use this insight to re-

flect upon their own teaching experiences and to achieve this balance between authority and nurturing roles. Since the challenges facing female faculty will vary by individual professor, prevalent institutional norms, and even course, the general advice for women would be to review their own SETs in light of these variations and of student expectations that women convey both authority and caring. Upon review of their own SETs and current practices, some women may find they should convey more authority, and others may need to appear more caring. Often, authority is more important early in the semester, while demonstrating concern for students becomes important when evaluating students and later in the semester. The specific suggestions are grouped into four areas: the syllabus and course management, the first day of class, grading, and classroom dynamics.

Syllabus and Course Management

A carefully crafted syllabus can help establish both authority in the classroom and concern for student learning from the very first day of the course. The syllabus should clearly reflect the care and thought put into the design of the course. Students expect professors to be well organized and present material clearly, and they will be more critical of female faculty who do not meet this expectation (Bennett 1982; Baldwin and Blattner 2003). A well-written, clearly organized, and complete syllabus can earn student respect early in the semester, making it especially important for women to proof-read their syllabi, make sure that reading lists are clear and complete, and that the course outlines reflect careful thought and knowledge of the subject matter.

Women can also establish authority by including very detailed descriptions of student expectations, assignments, grading, and course policies. This will help eliminate student confusion or concerns about how to succeed in the course. If course outlines, assignment due dates, grading, and other course policies are clearly explained in the syllabus and consistently followed throughout the term,

Michelle Dion is an assistant professor of international affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her research addresses the political economy of social policy in Latin America. She can be reached at: mdion@gatech.edu.

students will also be less likely to expect or ask for changes in the course and less likely to complain about course policies. If the course schedule and policies in the syllabus are reasonable and fair, it will be easier to consistently follow them.

At the same time, however, female faculty should be careful to not appear too draconian, inflexible, or unconcerned about students because this will clash with students' gender expectations. The syllabus may be written using positive, rather than putative, language. For example, "Late assignments received within the first 24 hours after the deadline are worth a maximum of 90% of the assignment's value," appears less harsh than, "Late assignments lose a letter grade the first day they are late."² Policies for make-up exams should be firm, but reasonable. They should also be applied consistently.

The syllabus should include regular items like office hours and contact information, but should also explain any policies regarding establishing meetings outside regular office hours and e-mail correspondence. For instance, it can be helpful to explicitly state that no appointment is needed during office hours, but that in the event of a schedule conflict, students should make an appointment for a meeting. Bringing a calendar to class and reminding students that they should make an appointment if they cannot come to office hours can also increase the perception of accessibility, which is particularly important for female faculty. This helps reiterate a willingness to meet with students but also that students should not expect unlimited access, thus demonstrating both accessibility but also appropriate distance. If students stop by at an inconvenient time, it helps to smile and offer to make an appointment so "they can have your complete attention." Again, such an approach reinforces a willingness to meet with students, while indicating that faculty time is not unlimited. This is important because research suggests students both expect female instructors to be more accessible than male instructors and feel that women are not accessible enough (Basow and Silberg 1987).

The First Day of Class

Like the syllabus, the first day of class is important for making a good first impression. During the first day of class, women faculty should begin to establish both their authority *and* concern for students. The carefully constructed syllabus and professional introduction to the course material should convey sufficient authority.

The discussion of the syllabus also provides an excellent opportunity to project concern for students through an explanation of the rationale behind the syllabus. For example, policies on make-up exams or late assignments can be explained not in terms of punishment but concerns about fairness to the majority of students who take the exam or complete the assignment on time. The first day is also a good time to mention the large numbers of e-mails received daily by faculty and particular policies regarding e-mail (e.g., how quickly student e-mails will be answered). If the course requires significant class discussion or student participation, it can be useful to explain that discussion is not just an exercise in exchanging ideas but can actually enhance student learning. It can also be useful to explain the rationale behind an attendance policy, if there is one, in terms of collective responsibility to the class or past observations that attendance has a positive effect on graded assignments.³ Likewise, relating assignments, like papers, presentations, or research projects, to the acquisition of useful skills can also convey a caring attitude by emphasizing that assignments are not just for evaluation purposes but to prepare students for future courses or careers. These explanations convey to students the concern that the faculty member has for their educational or professional development.

Usually, the first day of class includes some self-introduction by the professor. Ideally, this should include a balance of information that establishes instructor authority *and* empathy for students. The former can be accomplished with mention of academic credentials or research interests, while the latter may include recalling and sharing the professor's experiences as a student. For instance, when teaching quantitative methods, it can be useful to tell students about initial apprehension or skepticism as a student about the course that later turned into real enthusiasm for the ways quantitative tools can be used to answer questions.⁴ Women who have plenty of authority but would like to reinforce their accessibility can also share something about their background, hobbies, or travel experiences to break the ice or establish a more relaxed classroom environment. In smaller classes, it is customary to also invite students to introduce themselves by sharing their class, major, or other information. Sometimes it may also be helpful to have students write this as a mini-autobiography in which they also discuss what they hope to learn from the class. Take careful notes and try to learn names as quickly as possible. If learning

names is difficult, admit this and promise to try to learn names. Students will appreciate the honest effort.

Sometimes, the first day can seem too much like a long lecture about dos and don'ts for the class. An alternative is to include in the first day a mini "sample" of what students can expect throughout the course. If the class will be lecture based, present a mini lecture. If much of the class will be discussion based, begin with a mini discussion related to the course material. This helps students know what to expect from the course and lessens the likelihood of disappointment. At the same time, it is probably not a good idea to keep students the entire class time the first day if this is not the institutional norm.

Grading

Grading can be perilous for female faculty, especially if they have high expectations and are not "easy" graders. Studies show that when women give low grades, they are punished more on teaching evaluations than when men give low grades (Langbein 1994). While giving out lots of As is the easiest and most guaranteed way to earn higher evaluations (Ory 2001),⁵ female faculty can use other strategies to mitigate the effects of student grades on their SETs.

Having reasonable and clear assignments and grading criteria are a natural first step. Students are much less likely to blame the professor for their bad grades if they feel that the assignment and grading were fair. One strategy that works well for exams and papers is to have students turn in assignments anonymously, labeled only by student number. The other is to use grading rubrics, which are returned with the assignment (Roever and Manna 2005). As a bonus, grading rubrics can often speed up grading. If a significant portion of the final grade comes from class participation or discussion, make a point of taking notes during class on a copy of the class roll, and then use the notes in the calculation of the grade.⁶ Students will also begin to participate more if they notice their participation is being noted during class.

If the class has performed particularly well on an assignment, tell them so, and express personal satisfaction and pride in their accomplishment. If a significant portion of the grades are not As, returning graded work may require some finesse. Professors should avoid letting students pressure them to drop particular questions, change grades, or add a "curve" during the class in which exams or assignments are returned, which can

convey a lack of authority. Commit only to consider their concerns and announce a decision at the next class meeting. At the same time, expressing sincere concern in response to student frustrations can help diffuse their anger. If there is widespread dissatisfaction, use some of the class session to ask students how they prepared for the exam or went about working on the assignment and discuss ways that students might consider preparing for or working on the next one. Such a discussion could be enlightening for both students and the professor.

Above all, when returning graded assignments, encourage students who have concerns about their grades to wait at least one class period and then come to office hours or make an appointment for a meeting. Decline to talk to students after class only because “they won’t have your full attention.” After their initial panic subsides, most students will not follow up. For those who do, it is important to meet individually to convey concern about their progress in the course. Ask questions about how they prepared for the assignment or how much time they spent on the material. If they do not attend class regularly, remind them that students who attend class regularly receive higher grades. Encourage them to make an appointment or come to office hours before the next assignment. It is important to stress a willingness to help but also that it is the student’s responsibility to not wait until it is too late to receive help. Individual meetings with concerned students who are receiving bad grades can go a long way toward mitigating the likelihood that they will give significantly lower evaluations of the course. Meeting with students outside of class, in general but especially for women, improves teaching evaluations (Basow and Silberg 1987; Langbein 1994; Andersen and Miller 1997).⁷

In the syllabus, it is often useful to address issues related to re-grading exams or papers by requiring that students wait at least one class period before submitting their petitions for re-grade and that their petitions each be a page-long explanation of the reasons they believe their grades should be reconsidered. Such a policy suggests that the instructor is willing to entertain discussions about grading, but puts the burden on the student. Often, students will not bother to take advantage of such a policy, but will appreciate that it is available.⁸ Students should not be given re-grades without having to rewrite or provide additional work on the assignment because this can erode authority, particularly for female instructors.

It is also easier to begin a semester as a tough grader and gradually “lighten up” over the course of the semester, as students learn how to better study for exams or write papers for the course. Grading every assignment on a bell-curve can create problems if students genuinely improve, but their grades do not reflect their improvement (i.e., every assignment has a C+ mean). If more than 5 to 10% of the class is trying to appeal their grades on a particular assignment, it might suggest that the assignment or grading should be adjusted for all students or in the future.

Classroom Dynamics: The Serious and the Superficial

Students’ gender expectations for professors also include both personality and appearance, and female instructors must again establish both authority and caring, according to the literature on SETs. In terms of in-class interactions, students have higher expectations for female faculty in terms of organization, preparation, and delivery. They will be more critical of female professors who do not meet these standards than they would be of male professors (Bennett 1982; Baldwin and Blattner 2003). Women will want to make sure they speak loudly enough to be heard and should encourage students to move forward if the classroom has bad acoustics. Students can also easily see through efforts to project authority beyond the professor’s area of comfortable expertise. Acknowledging interesting or unexpected questions and admitting the limits of faculty expertise are totally acceptable and likely to be appreciated. Encourage students to look up the answers to the question and report back to the class during the next meeting (or via online course management tools, like Blackboard or WebCT), for extra credit or participation credit.

In order to meet students’ gender expectations (to earn higher SETs), women should also express interest in and concern for students. This can be as simple as arriving early to class to make “small talk” with students about their other classes or summer plans. It can also include remembering to express sympathy for students around midterms and finals by commenting on how busy or tired they must be at this point in the semester. With students at the beginning of their studies (e.g., first years, or new graduate students), emphasize that part of what they’ll be learning is how to prioritize and manage their new responsibilities. Periodically, offer tips on how to manage time or juggle multiple tasks. Professors

are experts on academic success and time management, and such advice should be a relatively cheap and easy way to satisfy students’ expectations that female professors nurture students. Professors should always try to acknowledge student contributions to the class discussions with appropriate compliments, which also tend to have positive effects on SETs (Andersen and Miller 1997).

Unfortunately, SETs are also sensitive to students’ expectations regarding professors’ dress and personal presentation. Ms. Mentor’s advice to readers suggests that tall women may need to appear more nurturing and less imposing, while petite women may need to work on projecting more authority and presence (Toth 1997, 85–9). Some of this may be accomplished by dress. Whether professors like it or not, students, both male and female, will pay much more attention to what their female professors are wearing. More conservative or formal dress to help establish authority is more important early in the semester than later, when it may be acceptable or even desirable to be a little less formal. Overly formal dress or suits, unless that is the departmental norm, may also make women seem too distant or inaccessible, which may hurt their SETs. For young women, the general suggestion would be to invest in neat-looking professional attire that is age appropriate—professional but hip, in a way that reflects individuality. Though hairstyles and make-up should not matter to teaching evaluations, they do, and so the same suggestions would apply. While the aforementioned suggestions may seem trite or superficial and are certainly things most women in the profession did not really think would be important when they decided to pursue a PhD, remember that SETs are usually completed by 18–24-year-olds who still rely on such social cues to form judgments and evaluations of their professors.

Finally, and most importantly, women should *smile*, be animated, and display enthusiasm for the material and teaching, all of which is associated with higher teaching evaluations (on smiling specifically, see Kierstead, D’Agostino, and Dill 1988; see also Widmeyer and Loy 1988; Arbuckle and Williams 2003; Sampayo 2006). Faculty enthusiasm can be a powerful motivator for students, creating a virtual cycle of enthusiasm for course material. Even professors who derive more satisfaction from research than teaching should find that trying to enjoy teaching may make it less of a chore and more fun. And, if SETs are higher as a result, it will only make teaching more rewarding.

Conclusions

In response to research that suggests that both male and female students expect female professors to conform to certain gender roles and to be both all-knowing and all-nurturing, this article has suggested a handful of pragmatic strategies that female faculty, especially those new to the tenure track, may consider using to improve their SETs. These

suggestions are only illustrative and not intended to be exhaustive, and it is likely that most women in our profession would have additional tips for balancing the seemingly contradictory gender roles that our students expect women to perform. Given the widespread use of SETs, and sometimes the mean response to only one question on a SET, in promotion, tenure, and merit raise decisions, if women are able to

employ various tactics to score a few points higher on SETs, it may help them achieve tenure and professional advancement. Of course, particular recommendations should be adjusted according to prevalent departmental norms, characteristics of students at particular institutions or in certain classes, and what is comfortable for the individual instructor.

Note

*This paper was originally presented at the roundtable on "Women Faculty in the Classroom: Strategies for Success," 2007 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 12–15. I thank the participants of the roundtable, Vicki Birchfield, and Katja Weber for useful discussion and comments.

1. Most studies address two or more of these groups of characteristics using either experimental or observational data from cross-sections of disciplines. See Basow and Silberg 1987; Kierstead, D'Agostino, and Dill 1988; Wigington, Tollefson, and Rodriguez 1989; Feldman 1993; Freeman 1994; Langbein 1994; Basow 1995;

Andersen and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Centra and Gaubatz 2000; Ory 2001; Ar buckle and Williams 2003; and Sampaio 2006. The findings that suggest that women are implicitly evaluated by standards different from those for men are largely consistent across discipline, institution, and time.

2. Using rewarding language also increases the perception of accessibility (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2002).

3. A scatterplot (or even regression) of assignment grades versus attendance rates can often be compelling evidence on the first day (from a prior iteration of the course) or on the day exam grades are distributed. The evidence is

even more compelling if the exam was multiple choice or the assignment was graded by student identification number.

4. McKeachie (1999, Chapter 4) has additional suggestions for the first day of class.

5. Giving students higher grades is one piece of advice Ms. Mentor gives untenured women (Toth 1997, 77).

6. A simple system using symbols to represent different quality comments is a useful shortcut.

7. However, meeting with every student outside of class may not be reasonable.

8. McKeachie (1999, Chapter 9) has useful grading and re-grading tips.

References

- Andersen, Kristi, and Elizabeth D. Miller. 1997. "Gender and Student Evaluations of Teaching." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30 (June): 216–8.
- Arbuckle, Julianne, and Benne D. Williams. 2003. "Students' Perceptions of Expressiveness: Age and Gender Effects on Teacher Evaluations." *Sex Roles* 49 (November): 507–16.
- Baldwin, Tamara, and Nancy Blattner. 2003. "Guarding Against Potential Bias in Student Evaluations: What Every Faculty Member Needs to Know." *College Teaching* 51 (winter): 27–32.
- Basow, Susan A. 1995. "Student Evaluations of College Professors: When Gender Matters." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 87 (December): 656–65.
- . 2000. "Best and Worst Professors: Gender Patterns in Students' Choices." *Sex Roles* 43 (September): 407–17.
- Basow, Susan A., and Nancy T. Silberg. 1987. "Student Evaluations of College Professors: Are Female and Male Professors Rated Differently?" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 79 (September): 308–14.
- Bennett, Sheila Kishler. 1982. "Student Perceptions of and Expectations for Male and Female Instructors: Evidence Relating to the Question of Gender Bias in Teaching Evaluation." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74 (April): 170–9.
- Centra, John A., and Noreen B. Gaubatz. 2000. "Is There Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching?" *The Journal of Higher Education* 70 (January/February): 17–33.
- Feldman, Kenneth A. 1993. "College Students' Views of Male and Female College Teachers: Part II—Evidence from Students' Evaluations of Their Classroom Teachers." *Research in Higher Education* 34 (April): 151–211.
- Freeman, Harvey R. 1994. "Student Evaluations of College Instructors: Effects of the Type of Course Taught, Instructor Gender and Gender Roles, and Student Gender." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 86 (December): 627–30.
- Ishiyama, John T., and Stephen Hartlaub. 2002. "Does the Wording of Syllabi Affect Student Course Assessment in Introductory Political Science Classes?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35 (September): 567–70.
- Kierstead, Diane, Patti D'Agostino, and Heidi Dill. 1988. "Sex Role Stereotyping of College Professors: Bias in Students' Ratings of Instructors." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80 (September): 342–4.
- Langbein, Laura I. 1994. "The Validity of Student Evaluations of Teaching." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27 (September): 545–53.
- Martin, Elaine. 1984. "Power and Authority in the Classroom: Sexist Stereotypes in Teaching Evaluations." *Signs* 9 (spring): 482–92.
- McKeachie, Wilbert J. 1999. *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 10th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Ory, John. C. 2001. "Faculty Thoughts and Concerns about Student Ratings." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 87 (fall): 3–15.
- Roever, Sally, and Paul Manna. 2005. "Could You Explain My Grade? The Pedagogical and Administrative Virtues of Grading Sheets." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 38 (April): 317–20.
- Sampaio, Anna. 2006. "Women of Color Teaching Political Science: Examining the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Course Material in the Classroom." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (October): 917–22.
- Statham, Anne, Laurel Richardson, and Judith A. Cook. 1991. *Gender and University Teaching: A Negotiated Difference*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Toth, Emily. 1997. *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Widmeyer, Neil W., and John W. Loy. 1988. "When You're Hot, You're Hot! Warm-Cold Effects in First Impressions of Persons and Teaching Effectiveness." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80 (March): 118–21.
- Wigington, Henry, Nona Tollefson, and Edme Rodriguez. 1989. "Students' Ratings of Instructors Revisited: Interactions Among Class and Instructor Variables." *Research in Higher Education* 30 (June): 331–44.