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Perceptions of gender competence: are Christian colleges different

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Abstract

Perceptions of student and professor competence and respect were investigated through a survey of 2042 students from 77 liberal arts colleges, both Christian and non-Christian. The Christian schools are part of the CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities); CCCU responses were 78.5 percent of the total. Chi-Square and Mann-Whitney tests were used to determine if gender and type of college affected students' responses. Two conclusions can be made about student competence and value: (1) male CCCU students are most likely to believe that male students are viewed as more competent than female students and (2) non-CCCU students are more likely to believe that male and female student opinions and questions are valued equally. Regarding faculty gender differences, two conclusions can be made: (1) non-CCCU males are most likely to believe that female and male professors are treated with equal respect, and (2) CCCU female students are least likely to believe that female and male professors are viewed as equally competent.

Students were also asked to identify factors that cause them to feel intimidated in a classroom. The top three reasons were difficulty of course content (60 percent of students), professor's teaching style (41 percent of students), and personality style of classmates (39 percent of students). The least cited reason (12 percent of students) was being a gender minority in the classroom.

Perceptions of gender competence: are Christian colleges different

“Too strong for a woman” – these words became the fighting words for University of Maryland professor Bernice Sandler as she was passed over for promotion, which ultimately ended up in the passage of Title IX in 1972 – a landmark event for women in education. Researchers concerned about sexism in education have typically focused on three explanations to explain gender discrimination: (1) patriarchy, which describes male domination; (2) institutional sexism, which describes inequalities in institutional structures and policies; and (3) sex-role stereotyping, which are individuals' belief in cultural gender roles. This paper focuses on the concept of sex-role stereotyping by comparing students at Christian colleges and non-Christian colleges and their perceptions of competence of female versus male students and professors. Statistical analysis of survey results shows statistically significant differences in responses due to both gender and type of college (CCCU or non-CCCU).

A seminal article on gender stereotyping (Broverman, et al., 1972) reported that males were perceived as being more intellectually competent than women. The question of stereotype accuracy has generated a growing body of research. Researchers have found gender differences in a variety of contexts: estimation of IQ (Reilly and Mulhern, 1995), knowledge of politics and sports trivia (Beyer and Bowden, 1997), and prior grades (Kurman and Sriram, 1997). Beyer (1998) investigated gender differences in self-perception accuracy and found that female college students underestimated their performance when performing a “masculine” task (sports questions) but with no gender differences for “feminine” and “neutral” tasks (knowledge of show business stars and of knowledge of literature and geography). In later research, Beyer (1999) found that both male and female students significantly underestimated female students' GPAs and significantly overestimated male students' GPAs. Guimond and Roussel (2001) found that perceived cognitive abilities in math, science, and language exhibit gender stereotyping and that both males and females students have inaccurate perceptions of their own ability because of these perceived gender differences.

College students are not the only group affected by gender stereotyping. In a study on gender differences on faculty evaluations (Arbuckle and Williams, 2003), students evaluated faculty differently depending on both age and gender; young male professors were rated the highest, even though their lectures were presented in identical manners and expressiveness by other professors, whether male or female, young or old. Bauer and Bales (2002) also found that college students evaluated female professors less accurately and more negatively. Based on interviews with faculty and cadets at The Citadel, Siskind and Kearns (1997) assert that faculty treatment by students is worse for female faculty and that the gender bias may well be part of institutional culture.

In 1982, Hall and Sandler prepared a report for the National Association for Women in Education entitled *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?* In this report, Hall and Sandler argued that, despite Title IX legislation and historically unprecedented numbers of women in higher education, female students still did not

enjoy full equality in educational opportunities. The authors summarized numerous studies from colleges and universities and documented that the campus experience of women was considerably different from that of men. They labeled this limiting and stifling experience a “chilly climate” and described such a climate as one in which many small inequities as well as faculty and peer behaviors (overt and subtle) create a negative atmosphere for learning and for teaching. It can be experienced by female students, female faculty, men, or those of minority populations.

In a follow-up study, Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall (1996) found that the climate on U.S. college and university campuses had not improved significantly for women, although in recent years a greater appreciation for the complexities of women’s experiences has developed among scholars, administrators, and faculty in U.S. colleges and universities. Despite the increasing numbers of female students, administrators and faculty, they documented that the classroom environment still does not encourage the involvement of female students in the educational process to the same degree as male students. The major findings cited in this report suggest that classroom style and communication patterns are more hospitable to men’s speech preferences than to women’s (i.e., competitive versus collaborative); that typical teaching behaviors reward autonomy, objectivity, and more verbal students; and that the curriculum to a large extent does not include the contributions or perspectives of women. These and other factors affect female student participation patterns, their satisfaction with the educational process, and their self esteem. The report aimed to set forth a vision for enhancing educational opportunities for women by valuing women’s experience, by encouraging faculty members to deliberately engage in behaviors to achieve gender equity in the classroom, and by including women’s perspectives and contributions in the curriculum.

The purposes of this study are two-fold: (1) to assess whether students in Christian colleges have different perceptions of faculty and student competence and treatment than students in secular colleges and (2) to assess the frequency of factors that contribute to a “chilly classroom” for CCCU and for non-CCCU students. In the case of classroom experience, gender can serve as divisions to assess differences of perceptions of student and professor competence. Yet, perhaps classroom experiences and perceptions for students in Christian colleges are different from students in secular colleges. Perhaps, perceptions of student and professor competence are based on an inherent belief/value system that is different for Christian students. For example, if survey responses show a statistically significant difference by gender, perhaps the difference is actually only true for the responses by Christian college students. The understandings that were developed as a result of this study are potentially significant in understanding students’ experience in the classroom, particularly those differences for Christian college students.

Method

Survey requests were sent to 146 liberal arts colleges across the country. These colleges included the 96 colleges that are part of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) and the 50 National Tier 1 Liberal Arts colleges (hereinafter referred to as non-CCCU) in the 2000 ranking by *U.S. News & World Report*. Survey requests were first mailed to college provosts/ academic officers and then to department chairs of six departments – biology, chemistry, business/economics, sociology, English, and philosophy. The participating chairs then distributed surveys to students for anonymous completion.

Responses were received from 117 departments at 77 colleges – 55 CCCU schools and 22 non-CCCU schools. CCCU responses accounted for 78.5 percent of the total 2042 useable surveys.

The survey had two sections: (1) four questions relating to perceptions of competence for male/female students and professors and (2) eight questions relating to factors that cause students to feel intimidated/less competent in a classroom. Responses were compared by both gender and by type of college (CCCU or non-CCCU) for statistical differences, using the Chi-Square test or the Mann-Whitney (Wilcoxon Rank Sum) test.

Perceptions of Student and Professor Competence

Responses for all four questions were statistically different between male and female students and also between CCCU and non-CCCU students, based on the Chi-Square test. The responses to the four questions are given below; a more detailed breakdown of responses is provided when the Chi-Square results indicate statistically significant differences between CCCU and non-CCCU male or female students.

1. Overall in classes in my major, male students seem to be viewed _____ female students.

	Female	CCCU Male	Non-CCCU Male
generally equally competent as	85.74%	81.33%	89.29%
somewhat less competent than	5.24%	9.41%	6.70%
somewhat more competent than	9.02%	9.26%	.02%
	100%	100%	100%

Chi-Square: male/female, $p=.007$

CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.004$

male CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.015$

These results indicate that responses are statistically significantly different for males and females and for CCCU versus non-CCCU schools. The responses for CCCU and non-CCCU females are similar; however, CCCU male students had significantly different responses than non-CCCU male students. Compared with male non-CCCU students, male CCCU students are less likely to believe that male and female students are viewed as equally competent.

2. Overall in classes in my major, questions and opinions from female students are given _____ as those from male students.

	Male	Female	CCCU	Non-CCCU
generally equal value	90.16%	91.62%	90.10%	94.29%
somewhat less value	4.05%	5.47%	5.45%	2.74%
somewhat more value	5.79%	2.91%	4.45%	2.97%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Chi-Square: male/female, $p=.002$
 CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.002$

Responses were statistically significantly different between male and female students overall and also between CCCU and non-CCCU students. Gender differences, however, were similar whether the students were from CCCU or from non-CCCU schools. Non-CCCU students are more likely to believe that female and male student questions and opinions are given equal value in the classroom.

3. Female professors are treated with _____ male professors.

	Female	CCCU Male	Non-CCCU Male
generally the same respect as	81.66%	82.49%	93.21%
somewhat less respect than	15.92%	13.72%	5.43%
somewhat more respect than	2.42%	3.79%	1.36%
	100%	100%	100%

Chi-Square: male/female, $p=.016$
 CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.000$
 male CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.001$

Differences in responses by gender are primarily due to differences in male CCCU versus non-CCCU students. Interestingly, however, responses of CCCU male students are very similar to female responses (whether CCCU or not). The non-CCCU male responses are very different from both females overall and the CCCU male students. The question arises, therefore, whether the treatment of female versus male professors is a perception issue or a reality issue

4. Overall on campus, male professors seem to be viewed _____ female professors.

	Male	CCCU Female	Non-CCCU Female
generally equally competent as	84.53%	77.54%	86.98%
somewhat less competent than	2.54%	3.04%	1.40%
somewhat more competent than	12.93%	19.41%	11.63%
	100%	100%	100%

Chi-Square: male/female, $p=.007$
 CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.000$
 female CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.008$

Although responses are again significantly different by gender, this time the difference is because of female CCCU versus non-CCCU responses. In fact, responses for male students from both CCCU and non-CCCU colleges are basically similar to those from non-CCCU female students. It is the CCCU female students whose responses are significantly different from the other students. CCCU female students are less likely to believe that male and female professors are viewed as equally competent. The question arises that if male CCCU students view male and female professors as equally competent, why do the female students at these CCCU schools not have the same perception.

The “Chilly” Classroom

Eight factors were identified as potential reasons for students feeling intimidated or less competent in a “chilly” classroom. Students indicated how frequently each of these factors affected their own classroom experiences. Responses for all eight questions were statistically significantly different between male and female students. Responses for four of the questions were also significantly different for CCCU versus non-CCCU students. Again, overall responses are given, with a more detailed breakdown if CCCU responses were significantly different between CCCU and non-CCCU male and/or female students.

5. How frequently have you been in a class (in your major) in which you felt intimidated, less competent, “silenced,” etc.?

	Male	Female
Often	5.64%	6.45%
Sometimes	24.86%	31.13%
Rarely	42.12%	41.44%
Never	27.39%	20.98%
	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, $p=.000$

Whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools, females are more likely to have felt intimidated, etc., in a class within their major. Responses were not statistically significantly different between CCCU and non-CCCU students.

6. How frequently have you been in a class (not in your major) in which you felt intimidated, less competent, “silenced,” etc.?

	Female	CCCU Male	Non-CCCU Male
Often	7.73%	8.50%	12.05%
Sometimes	32.65%	27.05%	30.36%
Rarely	42.78%	40.95%	37.05%
Never	16.84%	23.49%	20.54%
	100%	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, $p=.045$
 male CCCU/non-CCCU, $p=.071$

Whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools, female responses were similar. Male students from non-CCCU schools, however, were most likely to have felt intimidated in a class outside their major.

7. How frequently has the professor's teaching style/personality been a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, "silenced," etc., in a class?

	Male	Female
Often	7.24%	9.38%
Sometimes	31.03%	33.65%
Rarely	36.44%	38.47%
Never	25.29%	18.50%
	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, p=.002

Whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools, female students were more likely to be negatively affected by the professors' teaching styles and personality than were male students.

8. How frequently has the personality style of classmates been a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, "silenced," etc., in a class?

	Male	Female
Often	4.60%	9.54%
Sometimes	24.37%	36.60%
Rarely	37.59%	36.94%
Never	33.45%	16.92%
	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, p=.000

Whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools, female students were more likely to feel intimidated because of their classmates' personality styles.

9. How frequently has being a gender minority in the class been a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, "silenced," etc., in a class?

	Female	CCCU Male	Non-CCCU Male
Often	2.34%	1.89%	0.46%
Sometimes	10.83%	10.55%	5.48%
Rarely	24.87%	16.38%	11.87%
Never	61.96%	71.18%	82.19%
	100%	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, p=.000
male CCCU/non-CCCU, p=.0106

Responses for female students, whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools were similar. Male responses, however, were significantly different, based on type of school. In fact, responses from CCCU male students were more like those of the female students, in that they also were much more likely than non-CCCU male students to have been in a classroom in which they felt intimidated by being a gender minority.

11. How frequently has the difficulty of the course content been a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, "silenced," etc., in a class?

	CCCU Male	Non-CCCU Male	CCCU Female	Non-CCCU Female
Often	9.77%	16.52%	15.37%	20.09%
Sometimes	43.26%	41.52%	47.89%	46.73%
Rarely	30.08%	29.02%	24.53%	26.17%
Never	16.90%	12.95%	12.21%	7.01%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, p=.000
male CCCU/non-CCCU, p=.040
female CCCU/non-CCCU, p=.087

Responses by gender are again statistically significantly different, as are responses by type of schools. This time, however, type of college affects responses for both female and male students. Both male and female students from CCCU schools were more likely than their non-CCCU counterparts to have never felt intimidated by the difficulty of the course content. This result is very interesting, as the reason remains a mystery: is CCCU course content easier; are professors at CCCU schools more willing to explain, both in class and during office hours, difficult course content?

12. How frequently has the class size (either too small or too large) been a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, etc., in a class?

	Male	CCCU Female	Non-CCCU Female
Often	3.70%	7.17%	10.28%
Sometimes	23.67%	29.29%	31.78%
Rarely	30.02%	31.61%	31.31%
Never	42.61%	31.93%	26.64%
	100%	100%	100%

Mann-Whitney: male/female, p=.000
female CCCU/non-CCCU, p=.071

Responses by gender were again statistically significantly different. Male students, whether from CCCU or non-CCCU schools, were much less likely to feel intimidated because of class size than females from either type of school. Female non-CCCU students were somewhat more likely to feel intimidated by class size than female CCCU students.

The table provides the percentage of each student group that cited the factor as "often" being a reason for feeling intimidated, less competent, or "silenced" in a

classroom. For all five student categories, “difficulty of course content” is the reason for a student “often” feeling intimidated or less competent.

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WHO ANSWERED “OFTEN” FOR THE FACTOR BEING A REASON FOR A “CHILLY” CLASSROOM

	All	Male	Female	CCCU Male	CCCU Female
Difficulty of course content	14.22%	11.51%	16.25%	9.77%	15.37%
Professor’s teaching style	8.51%	7.24%	9.38%	6.66%	9.80%
Personality style of classmates	7.42%	4.60%	9.54%	5.26%	8.73%
Class size (too small/too large)	6.01%	3.70%	7.75%	3.74%	7.17%
Being a gender minority	1.99%	1.52%	2.34%	1.89%	2.13%

The results presented in this table are intriguing. The term “chilly classroom,” prevalent in the psychology and educational literature, connotes that being a gender minority in a classroom (with the emphasis typically on female students) feeling “silenced,” intimidated, and less competent than their male counterparts. Yet, only a very small percentage of students feel intimidated by “being a gender minority.” Conversely, a sizeable percentage of male students (even though less frequently than female students) do “often” feel intimidated in a classroom in which the course content is difficult.

The table below is perhaps a more important one for us as educators, since the percentages indicate responses of “often” or “sometimes” that each factor is a reason for feeling intimidated.

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WHO ANSWERED “OFTEN” OR “SOMETIMES” FOR THE FACTOR BEING A REASON FOR A “CHILLY” CLASSROOM

	All	Male	Female	CCCU Male	CCCU Female
Difficulty of course content	59.80%	54.32%	63.89%	53.02%	63.26%
Professor’s teaching style	41.02%	38.27%	43.03%	39.47%	42.26%
Personality style of classmates	38.77%	28.97%	46.14%	27.86%	44.48%
Class size (too small/too large)	33.17%	27.37%	37.53%	27.73%	36.46%
Being a gender minority	12.14%	10.77%	13.17%	12.44%	12.43%

Of particular concern is the observation that a sizeable percentage of students who feel intimidated in a classroom because of the professor’s teaching style – the only factor that we as educators can control. About 40 percent of all students – whether male or female, whether from a CCCU or non-CCCU school -- at least sometimes feel intimidated because of the professor. While between 50 and 60 percent of students at least sometimes feels intimidated because of the difficulty of course content, these percentages are not necessarily undesirable or able to reduced if the course content truly is difficult. A perhaps troublesome result is the high percentages of students who feel intimidated because of the personality style of their classmates. And again, being a gender minority is still the least frequent reason for feeling intimidated or less competent.

Conclusion

Harding (1990) and Hartsock (1983) suggest that in socially-stratified groups, those with less power are more aware than those with more power of the range of perspectives and attitudes represented in the group. If this is true, then researchers who seek to understand the nuances and realities within a given group would do well to listen carefully to those members who are less powerful within the stratification structure. In the context of this study, the gender differences in the responses to the survey questions are noteworthy. These questions are about perceptions, rather than reality; but perceptions are probably more important for a person’s experience in the classroom.

An encouraging result is that over 80 percent of all respondents believe that male and female students are viewed as equally competent. A somewhat surprising – and discouraging – result, however, is the differences in responses between male students from CCCU colleges and those from non-CCCU colleges. Compared to non-CCCU male students and to female students from both CCCU and non-CCCU colleges, a significantly greater percentage of male CCCU students believe that male students are viewed as more competent than female students.

Hall and Sandler’s (1982) research suggests strongly that the cumulative effect of gender messages can contribute to feelings of incompetence, insecurity, and alienation in college women. To that end, the responses for the two questions about male/female faculty are discouraging not only for female professors but especially for female professors at CCCU colleges. More credence should perhaps be given to the responses by female respondents in their assessment of how male and female professors are viewed and treated, since, as conceivably the less powerful within the stratification structure may be more aware of the reality, as suggested by Harding (1990) and Hartsock (1983). Although a significantly greater percentage of non-CCCU males believe that female and male professors are treated with equal respect, female students at both CCCU and non-CCCU colleges as well as male CCCU students do not agree. Even if female students’ perceptions are inaccurate, the male students at CCCU colleges agree with them regarding respect accorded to female and male professors.

Regarding professor competence, responses for female students at non-CCCU colleges were similar to their male classmates, although a sizeable proportion of both female and male students believe that male professors are viewed as more competent. These results are discouraging, particularly for female faculty and students; presumably, the colleges involved in the study hire faculty members who are competent, regardless of gender; why, then, the difference in perception of competence? At CCCU colleges, however, female and male responses were very different. Many more CCCU female students than male CCCU students believed that male professors are viewed as more competent. What messages are CCCU female students “receiving” that leads them to believe that male professors are viewed as more competent, a perception shared by a much smaller proportion of male students.

The results from the second part of the survey dealing with “chilly classroom” factors are somewhat surprising. Being a gender minority is not a major reason for students feeling intimidated, as would be expected given the voluminous amount of research in the literature dealing with gender differences in the classroom. Of course, students themselves may somewhat control the frequency of being in a “chilly classroom” by self-selecting into academic disciplines in which they are not a gender minority or in which they feel capable of the course content.

Regardless of whether male and female responses are similar or different, the bottom line results from this survey indicate that (1) even after decades of equal opportunity legislation, after decades of professional, educated women in the work force, women must still deal with perceptions of men being more competent than women and (2) both male and female students frequently feel intimidated in the classroom and that professor's teaching style is a major reason.

Professors, therefore, have an important role to play in helping students not to feel as though they are in a "chilly classroom." Professors also need to be aware of and address troublesome personality and behavioral issues of students in their classrooms. Faculty should seek to create learning environments in which students are treated with respect not only by their professors but also by their classmates.

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