

Faculty and Student Perceptions of Coursework: Significant Differences

Origins of the Data

Miami participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). NSSE is administered to random samples of first-year students and seniors. FSSE is administered to a random sample of faculty. The NSSE data is from 2003 and the FSSE data is from 2004.

Included in these surveys were a number of questions that were the same on both the student and faculty forms. Students were asked how often they experienced certain activities such as working with others or synthesizing material in their courses. The faculty were asked how much emphasis they placed on the same activities. In both cases, the data is about student and faculty perceptions of what happens in the classroom rather than actual measurements of time spent on various tasks.

The Questions

For a number of these student/faculty data pairs, there is a statistically significant difference in perceptions. Five were selected for presentation:

- Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses
- Solving complex real-world problems
- Thinking critically and analytically
- Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information and experiences
- Working with other students on projects during class

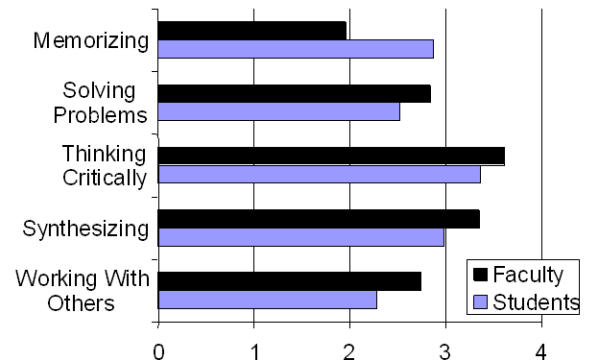
Both students and faculty answered the questions on a four point scale: 1=very little 2=some; 3=quite a bit; and 4=very much.

Results

Compared to national averages the results are mixed. Miami students perceive that they think critically more frequently than their peers nationwide do. They perceive that they solve real-world problems and work with others during class less frequently. Our students perceive they are synthesizing and organizing ideas at the same rate as students nationally. In all four cases, Miami

students perceive they are not engaging in these activities as often as faculty perceive they are. Students also perceive that their courses emphasize memorization more than faculty believe they do. These results may indicate a lack of communication between faculty and students about important class activities. Another possibility is that what faculty intend to emphasize when thinking about a course in general and what actually happens in the classroom may be different.

Perceived Frequency of Course Activities



Implications for Faculty

Faculty may want to spend some time early in a course and periodically thereafter discussing with students the thinking skills that they should be developing or practicing in the course. The difference between memorizing and analyzing perhaps deserves special attention.

As we develop syllabi for new courses or revise old ones, we should critically look at our assignments to see if they are likely to evoke the kinds of thinking we want students to do. We should also examine our examinations to make sure that we are indeed asking students to do more than repeat memorized information.