

Student Rights and the Role of Faculty

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[Student Rights and the Role of Faculty](#)

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I remember the first time I tackled the controversial subject of students as customers. It was in an in-house newsletter, well before the advent of the Internet and e-mail. Even so, I had numerous phone calls, memos, encounters on campus, and discussions about it in every activity the teaching center sponsored for the next year. I hadn't even taken a side; I had simply listed arguments for both sides. But, as far as the faculty were concerned then and pretty much since, there aren't two sides. Students are not customers. Tuition dollars do not buy grades. Education does not come with a money-back guarantee. And students don't get to choose what they learn—well, they do, but if they don't choose to learn what we require, the consequences are costly.

Despite the few reasonable similarities between students and customers, it's still a hair-raising comparison for most faculty. I wonder if we might look at the issue more constructively by considering it from the vantage of student rights. Does investment in college courses entitle students to certain things? The opportunity to learn, I know, but under what conditions? I recently reread a chapter by Conwell Strickland in the 1975 release *Excellence in University Teaching: New Essays*. His piece "Students' Rights and the Teacher's Obligations in the Classroom" contains a list we could use to start a conversation about the learning-related conditions students have the right to expect in every college course.

The student has the right to be recognized as an individual. It's a basic democratic value: individual dignity. But can those who teach large courses recognize each student as an individual? If so, how?

The student is entitled to a faculty member interested in teaching. Today we might say, "a teacher who cares about student learning." Can students learn when the faculty member doesn't care? They can, but not as easily, according to research.

The student is entitled to instruction based on adequate preparation. Teachers should know the content well, and most do. Strickland broadens this to include adequate teacher training and knowledge of instructional methods, but we're still spotty on the training and fairly loose on the expectations for the ongoing growth and development of teachers.

Students have a right to express opinions and to challenge those of the instructor. We might add that they need to express their opinions and challenge those of others in a respectful manner. Can we agree that they have the right to expect their opinions will not be held against them? They won't get lower grades, snide remarks, or critical feedback if their opinions differ from ours.

Instruction should be individualized. Strickland wasn't advocating different curricula or sets of learning experiences for each individual student. "Personalized" might be a better word for it. Students have the right to know how what they're being asked to learn relates to them personally.

The student is entitled access to the teacher at hours other than class time. These days, technology makes access possible 24/7. Is that more than students should expect? How much access do students deserve?

The student is entitled to know the system by which he [or she] is to be graded. Most syllabi provide this information in detail.

The student has the right to attend or not to attend class. Strickland acknowledges that not everyone will agree, but believes that if a student can demonstrate the knowledge and skills specified in the course objectives, they should not have to attend. The issue is whether students can accurately assess their knowledge and skills. On the flip side is the question of whether students should be obligated to share their knowledge, experience, and skills with others in the course. Does a student have any responsibilities towards his or her classmates? What does membership in a community of learners imply?

Students have a right to evaluate their courses and teachers. Not because they've paid for those

courses, according to Strickland, but because they are obligated to provide input that can help the instructor improve—and, we might add, make the course better for future students.

Since the publication of Strickland’s list, we now have legal guarantees for students with disabilities. What else belongs on an updated list? Although we may benefit from crafting our own individual lists, any list will be much more useful if everyone in a department, college, or institution supports it. As it stands, rights like those on this list don’t come with guarantees. Strickland correctly points out that it’s pretty much up to the individual teacher.

Yes, I know: Teachers have rights, too. But teachers have more power in the classroom than students, and that means we have an obligation to protect the rights of students as learners. I welcome your feedback [in the comments section](#).

Reference: Strickland, Conwell. “Students Rights and the Teacher’s Obligations in the Classroom,” in T. H. Buxton and K. W. Prichard, eds., *Excellence in University Teaching: New Essays*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1975.



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