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Terry L. Sharik

Department of Forest Resources, Utah State University, Logan

J. Douglas Wellman

Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

Sarah Banks

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

Erick T. Byrd

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

David Cardenas

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

See next page for additional authors

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Student perceptions of a high-quality undergraduate experience: Implications for teaching and learning in natural resources

Authors

Terry L. Sharik, J. Douglas Wellman, Sarah Banks, Erick T. Byrd, David Cardenas, and Tricia M. Day

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A HIGH-QUALITY UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NATURAL RESOURCES

**Terry L. Sharik,¹ J. Douglas Wellman,² Sarah Banks,³
Erick T. Byrd,³ David Cardenas,³ and Tricia M. Day³**

¹Professor and Head, Department of Forest Resources, College of Natural Resources, Utah State University, Logan, UT, 84321-5215. E-mail: tlsharik@cnr.usu.edu

²Professor, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, College of Natural Resources, and Director, Center for Teaching and Learning, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-7111

³Graduate Student, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695

ABSTRACT: Richard Light (2001) recently published what many consider to be one of the most insightful treatments of what *students* think constitutes a high-quality undergraduate experience and what can be done by the academy to create an environment that fosters this experience. It is based on a decade of research involving interviews with more than 1,600 undergraduates (mostly seniors), with questions designed by more than 60 faculty members from more than 20 colleges and universities, and results shared more widely with more than 90 colleges and universities (suggesting broad applicability). We highlighted Light's ten major findings for the participants (largely faculty) in our facilitated discussion session. Then, using breakout groups, we asked them to reflect on their own experiences relative to these major findings and indicate positive and/or negative aspects of each for undergraduate education in natural resources. Below we state each finding and summarize participant responses.

Finding 1: A large majority of students say they learn significantly more in courses that are highly structured with many quizzes and short assignments.

Response: The majority of the participants agreed with this finding. They believed this was especially true in natural resources courses and in introductory courses. A few of the panelists expressed concern that highly structured courses may involve memorizing facts and figures and not prepare students to think critically, which in turn would not prepare the student for the senior class or his or her first job.

Finding 2: Working together on homework assignments increases both learning and engagement in classes.

Response: Overall, it was concluded that working together on assignments can be a positive experience for students. It allows them to experience part of a real-world environment where they are forced to work with others, often with different backgrounds and ideas than themselves. Moreover, it is a more active form of learning and thus engages students more than working alone. It was noted that there are many different approaches and philosophies to implementing group assignments in a class setting. Participants felt that the only major drawback to group assignments is that they can make it difficult to evaluate individual performance and understanding of the topic.

Finding 3: Students who get the most out of college, who grow most academically, and who are happiest organize their time to include activities with faculty members, or with several students, focused on accomplishing substantive academic work.

Response: Most participants agreed with this statement. It was felt that an important contribution of faculty advisers is to get students involved with something that is meaningful to them, which can be a real challenge where academically challenged or unmotivated students are involved, or advising loads are heavy. There was some

feeling that such contributions by faculty may not be rewarded by the institution, and thus faculty may have to be content with the self-satisfaction that comes from doing the right thing.

Finding 4: Small-group tutorials, small seminars, and one-on-one supervision are, for many students, their capstone experience.

Response: There was general agreement with this finding, especially early on at the freshman or sophomore level, as it helps students to learn proper study habits and to access information. It may also help with student retention at the university level. Drawbacks to these approaches included the large amount of time investment on the part of faculty and overdependence by students on others.

Finding 5: Many students identified a mentored internship, where students create their own project and implement it under the supervision of a faculty member, not done for academic credit, as a particularly critical or profound experience at college.

Response: The participants agreed that mentored internships could be beneficial for both students and faculty, although as a group they had little experience with this form of teaching and learning. The key to success is to focus on the process, not the product. The fact that such experiences are not for credit or pay was considered very important.

Finding 6: Learning outside classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities (such as the arts), is vital.

Response: There was general agreement with this finding. Outside activities seem to offer a break from the focus in the classroom and allow for creativity and self-expression upon returning to the classroom. Moreover, such activities tend to enhance skills for success in the workplace.

Finding 7: A large majority of students describe particular activities outside the classroom as profoundly affecting their academic performance.

Response: The group agreed that activities outside the classroom had an effect on a student's academic performance, and that this effect could be positive or negative depending on what the activity is, how much time the student devotes to this activity, and the basic nature of the student. If an activity is a distraction from class, where a student is able to relax and get refreshed, then it is likely to be positive. If, on the other hand, the activity is considered to be in competition with class, then there are likely to be negative effects. The participants also felt that any activity or group of activities that took up more than 20 hours a week outside of class are likely to have negative effects.

Finding 8: For most students, the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on their college learning experience is strong, and a purposeful campus atmosphere and living arrangements are crucial to success.

Response: Most participants agreed that integration of various races and ethnic groups must be engineered, preferably starting in the freshman year. However, they noted that in order to do so, there had to be such diversity to begin with, which is a problem for most natural resource programs. Most diversity in such programs is associated with area of study (major), geographic origin, and social-economic background of students. Homogeneity among faculty can also hinder diversity in the student body. Prestigious colleges and universities with large endowments are much more likely to have this diversity. The recent increase in gender diversity in natural resource programs was thought to promote a shift in perspectives, e.g., an increased emphasis by females on interrelationships.

Finding 9: *Students care deeply about writing and hunger for specific suggestions about how to improve it.*

Response: This assertion did not match with the experience of natural resource faculty. One key to addressing the challenge is to consider two major goals for writing, i.e., sharing information and providing a way of learning. With respect to the latter, it seems useful to think in terms of writing that synthesizes and writing for deeper learning.

Finding 10: *Students talk about foreign languages and literature with special enthusiasm.*

Response: In general, this assertion is not supported by the experiences of natural resource faculty. Foreign languages and literature are not key components in natural resource curricula, and it would be difficult to make them so. Most of our students don't see the value in spending their time and energy with these topics.

LITERATURE CITED

Light, R. J. 2001. *Making the most of college: students speak their minds*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 242 pp.