

# Academic Entitlement in the Context of Learning Styles

Jean Andrey

*University of Waterloo*

Erin Joakim

*University of Waterloo*

Vivian Schoner

*University of Waterloo*

Derrick Hambly

*University of Waterloo*

Amber Silver

*University of Waterloo*

Rohan Jayasundera

*University of Waterloo*

Allen Nelson

## Abstract

This study explores the linkages between students' sense of entitlement and their approaches to learning, based on survey research at a large public university in Canada. Through literature review and pilot testing, a questionnaire instrument was developed that measures four constructs: academic entitlement, deep learning, surface learning and strategic learning. Survey responses (n=2116) suggest that students approach learning in mixed ways, and that approaches to learning intersect with students' sense of entitlement in complex ways. Overall, students' scores on the sense of entitlement scale were found to be moderate, challenging some of the assertions about today's students that have been made in the popular press.

## Précis/Résumé

Sur la base d'un sondage mené dans une grande université canadienne, cette recherche explore les liens entre le sentiment de légitimité (*sense of entitlement*) des étudiants et leurs stratégies d'apprentissage. À la suite d'une revue de la littérature et d'une étude pilote, un questionnaire a été développé afin de mesurer quatre concepts: la légitimité académique (*academic entitlement*), l'apprentissage en profondeur, l'apprentissage superficiel et l'apprentissage stratégique. Les réponses du sondage (n=2116) suggèrent que les étudiants abordent l'apprentissage de manières mixtes et que leurs stratégies d'apprentissage et leur sentiment de légitimité s'entrecoupent de manières complexes. Dans l'ensemble, les étudiants affichent des résultats modérés sur l'échelle du sentiment de légitimité, ce qui remet en question certaines affirmations parues dans les journaux à propos des étudiants d'aujourd'hui.

### Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been increased media coverage regarding declining student engagement along with high levels of entitlement in academic settings. These communications often assert that students expect high grades even with minimal work (c.f. Associated Press, 2007; CBC, 2007) and that current generation(s) of students have higher levels of academic entitlement than previous cohorts. For example, the work of Greenberger et al. (2008) found that 40% of university students believe that they deserve a B-grade for completing most of the required readings for a course, and 35% of students believe that they deserve a B-grade for attending most of the course lectures. This work was cited in a *New York Times* article as evidence for rising levels of student entitlement (Roosevelt, 2009).

Considerable discussion has been generated by such claims. One concern is that little historical data exists on which to make comparative assessments (Weber, 2009). Also, in most cases, discussions of student expectations are not contextualized within broader changes in society. Indeed, insights garnered from studies of student populations may be reflective of changes in society in general, rather than speaking to the unique traits of students. For example, Oberlin (2009) notes that instructors may have a sense of

entitlement themselves, feeling deserved of respect and having specific expectations of what students should get out of their courses. Within the context of changing social and cultural norms, increased individualism, rapidly increasing technological advances, increased competition for scholarships, employment, and changing expectations regarding the role of post-secondary education, student attitudes and behaviours may be a reflection of changing societal attitudes and behaviours (Trzesniewski et al., 2008a; Lippman et al., 2009). As well, some of these changes are not necessarily negative, as students are also reporting higher levels of self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, and overall well-being (Arnett, 2007; Coates & Morrison, 2011).

Apart from the debate over changing levels of academic entitlement, there is the more basic issue of how to measure this construct, and the more important question of how sense of entitlement intersects with learning. While the amount of rigorous scholarship on students' sense of entitlement is growing, it is still limited. The current project contributes to the ongoing discussion about post-secondary students' sense of entitlement, by reporting and interpreting the findings of a survey conducted at a large, public university in Canada. The specific objectives of the study are to develop a questionnaire instrument that adequately captures the construct of academic entitlement as well as three approaches to learning that are discussed in the academic literature, namely deep, surface, and strategic learning; and to explore the intersection of academic entitlement with learning approaches.

## **Research Context**

### **Sense of Entitlement**

In the educational context, entitlement can be defined as the “tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success” (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 982). In the recent book *Campus Confidential*, Coates and Morrison (2011) argue that students “expect material well-being and an easy passage through school, university, and work...they often expect deadlines to be altered, want their explanations accepted without confirmation, and try to insist that course requirements fit their availability to do work” (p. 113). These types of assertions, however, have a tendency to be based on illustrative examples and anecdotes.

Measuring academic entitlement and changes over time is not easy. Using the entitlement subscale in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), for example, Twenge et al. (2008) argue that there have been significant increases in narcissism and entitlement among student populations over the past thirty years, terming students born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s “generation me”. This work has been heavily cited to support the claim that entitlement levels among students are increasing, although Trzesniewski et al. (2008b) challenge the findings, noting sampling and methodological issues. Indeed, the work of Trzesniewski et al. (2008b) indicates little change in levels of narcissism and only slight increases in levels of entitlement.

A high level of entitlement has generally been considered a negative trait, with associations to a variety of maladaptive behaviours, including, greed, selfishness, lack of self control and aggression (Campbell et al., 2004; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Pryor et al., 2008). More recently, this negative and simplified understanding has been challenged, with recent research alluding to a more complex construct of academic entitlement. Lessard et al. (2011) compare different forms of entitlement, analyzing both “exploitative entitlement” (the belief that one deserves more than others) and “non-exploitative

entitlement” (the belief that one deserves positive outcomes without exploiting others). Higher levels of non-exploitative entitlement were positively correlated to higher levels of self esteem and positive work orientations, indicating that some forms of entitlement may be related to levels of achievement. In this sense, students may feel entitled to academic success because of their desire and willingness to work to achieve success (Lessard et al., 2011).

Levels of engagement in learning may also be impacted by students’ sense of entitlement, both positively and negatively (Bergman et al., 2010). While certain forms of entitlement may be associated with positive traits, such as constructive work orientations, entitled students also reported higher parental expectations and external motivations for seeking academic success. This type of extrinsic motivation may lead to lower levels of interest in the learning process and an increased focus on achieving higher grades (Greenberger et al., 2008; McCune & Entwistle, 2000). Sense of entitlement has also been related to external locus of control, indicating that students may perceive that grades and academic outcomes have more to do with courses, professors, and other external controls, as opposed to their own skills. Students who have a sense of entitlement may fail to develop appropriate strategies and self-directed approaches to succeed and achieve their best outcomes in university (Chowning & Campbell, 2009).

The diversity of evidence indicates an incomplete understanding of the positive and negative aspects of entitlement in academic settings. Furthermore, while entitlement research has examined temporal changes in levels of entitlement (Twenge et al., 2008; Trzesniewski et al., 2008a and 2008b), personality, parenting, and motivation factors (Greenberger et al., 2008), and compared entitlement levels to other related constructs such as narcissism, grandiosity and aggression (Chowning & Campbell, 2008), there is

limited knowledge as to how varying levels of entitlement intersect with student learning styles.

### **Learning Styles**

Universities are increasingly concerned about student engagement in the learning process (Biggs, 1987). The concepts of deep and surface learning were first developed by Marton and Säljö (1976) who argued that students adopt an approach to learning that suits the needs of the academic task assigned to them. Deep approaches to learning focus on the process of learning and understanding of the subject, whereas surface approaches focus on reproducing and memorizing information. Deep learning approaches tend to exhibit a more comprehensive and sophisticated approach to learning in terms of mastery of content and related conceptual understanding, application, and generalization. On the other hand, surface approaches routinely rely on memorization, focus efforts on what is required to pass, and are associated with lower levels of interest in the material and assignments presented. Table 1 summarizes deep and surface approaches to learning, which are used to understand how students approach academic tasks.

Table 1: Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning

| Deep Approach   | Surface Approach  |
|---|---|
| Knowledge transforming orientation<br>Intention to understand material and seek meaning<br>Vigorous and critical interaction with knowledge content<br>Relating ideas to one's previous knowledge and experience<br>Gaining an overview of the material though the use of organization principles to integrate ideas<br>Relating evidence to conclusions<br>Questioning and critically evaluating logical arguments and evidence used | Information reproducing orientation<br>Intention is to reproduce units of information and cope with course requirements<br>Ideas and information accepted passively and units of information are treated as unrelated bits of knowledge<br>Focus on assessment outcomes and syllabus requirements<br>Little to no reflection on the purpose or strategies used to complete assignments<br>Memorizing facts and procedures |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Seeking the main point and drawing key conclusions | Failure to distinguish guiding principles or patterns<br>See little to no value/meaning in coursework or assignments |
|--|--|

Source: (IAUL, 2011; McCune & Entwistle, 2000; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004, p. 415)

While the separation of deep and surface learning in Table 1 is clear, the actual strategies used by students are more complex and students may use different approaches to learning depending on the requirements of specific tasks and courses as well as their goals in terms of academic outcomes (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Biggs, 1987). More advanced learners combine different strategies, depending on the circumstances (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). In this sense, some tasks may require routine memorization which can be used at later points to develop meaning and understanding. Thus the boundaries between learning approaches are not necessarily clear in individual students; rather it is likely that most students exhibit some aspects of both deep and surface learning approaches.

This led to the development of a third to learning, termed strategic learning. Strategic learning approaches seek to achieve successful academic outcomes in their courses. In order to achieve these goals, strategic learners thoughtfully organize their study habits, manage their time and efforts, and are able to motivate themselves to concentrate on specific tasks whether they find the material interesting or not (Biggs, 1987). They are alert to assessment requirements and criteria, monitor the effectiveness of their study and learning habits, and generally feel personal responsibility for their academic outcomes (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Accordingly, these strategic learners may exhibit lower levels of entitlement as they feel internal control over their academic outcomes. Due to the advanced nature of strategic and achievement motivated learning approaches, it is expected that deep and strategic learners would be highly related.

In terms of linkages between learning styles and levels of entitlement, research indicates that there may be a relationship between the aforementioned constructs and student choice of discipline. Narcissistic students may be drawn towards disciplines that focus more on memorization skills and surface learning as opposed to reflective learning and critical analysis (Bergman et al., 2010). While narcissism and entitlement are not the same concepts, entitlement is considered one aspect of narcissism, in some cases the most negative trait. Therefore, there may be some correlation between learning strategies and entitlement (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Trzesniewski et al., 2008b). Students from different programs also exhibit varying levels of entitlement and narcissism, indicating the need to compare and analyze sense of entitlement and learning styles from both a group and discipline perspective (Bergman et al., 2010). Different programs and enrolment year may also have an impact of learning styles, as certain disciplines may require an initial surface approach to learning before more deep approaches can be fully implemented (McCune & Entwistle, 2000).

This indicates that there is a need for improved understanding of the intersection between approaches to learning and entitlement levels. While the literature would lead us to expect that sense of entitlement would correlate positively with surface learners, we hypothesize that sense of entitlement may intersect with learning styles in more complex ways than has been previously postulated in the literature. This thinking formed the basis of the current study.

### **Methods**

In order to explore connections between sense of entitlement and approaches to learning, a questionnaire was developed, drawing on previous research. Most of the entitlement-



focused questions were taken from the recent work by Greenberger et al. (2008), who developed a 15-item entitlement scale with reported high internal validity ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ). An alternative would have been to use the entitlement sub-scale of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI); however questions have been raised regarding the validity of using this subscale as a stand-alone measure of entitlement (Trzesniewski et al., 2008a). The Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES) is another well-known and valued example of a stand-alone entitlement scale, although the scale includes elements related to all aspects of life, including romantic relationship attitudes and lack of forgiveness, which go beyond the aspects considered relevant to this research (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Campbell et al., 2004).

For the three learning constructs, namely deep, strategic, and surface learning, the majority of questions were taken from the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments (ETL) project, conducted jointly by researchers from the Universities of Edinburgh, Coventry, and Durham. Their Approaches to Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) survey, as well as earlier, preliminary versions (such as the LSQ and ETLQ) were the primary source of questions. These were supplemented with questions that were inspired by themes and questions in the Learning and Study Skills Inventory (LASSI) developed at the University of Texas at Austin by Claire Ellen Weinstein and colleagues.

Questions were adapted to the Canadian context, as necessary. There was a need to limit the number of questions as the decision was made to administer the questionnaire during class time to ensure a high participation rate, and also avoid the biases that can result from other large-scale sampling methods, such as Internet-based surveys (McGuirk

and O'Neill, 2010). This meant that the focus would be on developing three or four main scales, as opposed to numerous sub-scales.

The data collection occurred in two separate phases. In the first phase, a pilot study was conducted in selected undergraduate classrooms, and the data were analyzed to ensure that the survey instrument adequately captured the constructs under investigation. Based on previous research, it was unclear whether sense of entitlement would emerge as its own scale or reflect a tendency for surface learning. The sample size of the pilot study was therefore necessarily large.

The pilot survey included 90 close-ended (five-point) substantive questions and seven questions on respondent demographics. Responses for each of the substantive questions were on a five-point scale: (1) Not at all typical of me, (2) Not very typical of me, (3) Somewhat typical of me, (4) Fairly typical of me, and (5) Very much typical of me. The pilot sample was conducted in Fall 2009 and Winter 2010 in several first-year classes at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. The sample included 479 first- and second-year students (72.4% and 27.6%, respectively) with a mean age of 20-21 years. Of these respondents, 68% were male and approximately 50% were Canadian-born. The pilot sample included students from all Faculties at the University of Waterloo, although students from the Faculty of Engineering were over-represented (51%), largely reflecting on-campus contacts between the investigators and other professors.

While responses to individual questions are interesting, the main focus in the pilot study was on scale construction. Based on the previous literature, we expected that our questionnaire would adequately address the three approaches to learning—deep, strategic, and surface. The questions on sense of entitlement could potentially be

incorporated into another scale or they could comprise a fourth scale. To explore this issue, Cronbach alpha values were calculated for question sets; these values provide an indication of the internal consistency of response patterns for the various questions included in a scale (see Santos, 1999 for an explanation of Cronbach's Alpha). When the entitlement questions were analyzed as a group on their own, the resultant Cronbach's Alpha score was 0.76, suggesting a reliability of 76. The alpha values for the other three scales were also reasonable: 0.82, 0.70, and 0.77 for deep, surface, and strategic learning, respectively. The decision was made to therefore proceed with four scales, while working to improve scale reliability through revisions to the instrument.

As well, feedback from the course instructors indicated that the questionnaire was too long for in-class completion. The decision was made, therefore, to shorten the questionnaire from 90 to 70 substantive questions. We noted that response patterns to some questions were poorly associated with others in the same scale, and so these were removed. As well, questions that were mostly redundant in substance with another question were removed. Altogether, we removed 30 questions. We then added 10 questions in order to create better distinction between surface learning (as routine memorization or lack of purpose) and sense of entitlement (as expecting the university and its members to meet particular expectations of the individual student). We also modified some questions to improve comprehension. The final questionnaire contained 51 learning style questions (16 on deep learning, 16 on surface learning, 19 on strategic learning), 19 on sense of entitlement, and the same seven questions on respondent demographics as had been used in the pilot study. Response options for the substantive questions were the same as in the pilot study.

The revised questionnaire was administered in undergraduate classes at the University of Waterloo from January to September, 2011, and yielded a completion rate of approximately 80%. In total, 2116 students completed the large-scale survey. First- and second-year students (mostly aged 18 and 19) comprised 61% of the sample; second-year and higher levels constituted 16% and 23% respectively. The male-female split was 56-44% and nearly two-thirds of the respondents were Canadian born, with 61% having English as their first language. Classes from each of the following programs were included in the larger study (19 different courses in total), providing a campus cross-section of the lower-level undergraduate programs: Accounting; Arts; Biology; Civil Engineering; Environment and Business; Geography; Kinesiology; Pharmacy; Philosophy; Physics; Recreation and Leisure Studies; Sexuality, Marriage and Family Studies; Mathematics; and Sociology.

The analysis focused on students' scores on the four scales. Each student's score was calculated as the average value for the questions comprising a scale. Responses were reverse-coded for those questions that were stated in a way opposite to the construct being measured. Statistical analysis included cluster analysis as a basis for defining groups of students with similar scores on the four scales.

## **Results**

### **An Introduction to the Scales**

The first step in the analysis was to check the reliability of the four scales. Cronbach alpha values were found to be acceptable for all four scales, and were higher than in the pilot study: 0.82, 0.77, and 0.80 for deep, surface, and strategic learning, respectively; and 0.83 for sense of entitlement. The correlations between students' scores on the learning scales were as expected: a positive association between deep and strategic

learning (0.438), and inverse relationships between surface learning and both deep and strategic learning (-0.414 and -0.426, respectively). Entitlement correlated positively with surface learning (0.509) and negatively with deep and strategic learning (-0.138 and -0.062, respectively). Although all correlations are statistically significant, the latter two coefficients are very low, suggesting that some students who scored high on deep and/or strategic learning also scored high on the entitlement scale, and *visa versa*. This suggests that some of the more entitled students may also be good scholars, something that challenges the often negative portrayal of postsecondary students.

As a way of entering into the data, we begin with an overview of the three approaches to learning. The questions used to measure these constructs are shown in Appendix A. First, deep learning, as described by Entwistle (2008), depends on being interested in the subject matter, having the necessary prior knowledge to be able to make sense of it, and engaging in organized effort. It requires both careful examination of the "implications of evidence in detail and also the patterns of interconnections which relate ideas and concepts" (p. 9). In the current study, 16 questions are devoted to this construct, and these relate to seeking meaning, use of evidence, and interest/effort. While responses varied by question and student, the average score for this scale was 3.3 (out of 5), indicating that most students identify with several of the characteristics of deep learning. In fact, the vast majority of participants indicated that it is important to them to be able to see the reasoning behind things and that they try to make sense of things by linking them to what they already know.

In contrast, those who use a surface approach tend to be more focused on trying to remember answers, and common outcomes of this approach are that students miss the point and are bound by the course material as presented. In the current study, 16

questions are devoted to this theme, and the average score of this scale was 2.8 (out of 5.0). Again, this suggests that most students do approach some of their material in a superficial way. For example, most students indicated that they have to just memorize a good deal of what they have to learn, and that they gear their studying closely to what seems to be required for assignments and exams; this is not surprising in lower level courses where the foundations of disciplines are being established and students are confronted with large volumes of unfamiliar material.

The third scale, which is labeled the strategic approach, is mostly about achievement and the development of techniques that contribute to high grades or career goals. In the current survey, 19 questions are devoted to this theme. These relate to awareness of assessment demands, organized studying, using resources and monitoring effectiveness. The average score on this scale was 3.3 (out of 5), again suggesting that most students have adopted some strategies for success including looking carefully at comments on graded work to see how to get higher marks next time, thinking about the best way to go about things, and checking a finished piece of work over to see if it really meets the requirements.

In addition to the three approaches to learning, the instrument also provides insight into entitlement, which is conceptualized in the current study as a sense that the student deserves certain grades or services. This scale is based on 19 questions. The average score was 2.5 (out of 5), which is comparable to the average value of 2.6 (out of 6) found by Greenberger et al. (2008) in their study of undergraduates at a large university in the United States. While there is no baseline value against which to judge this average, it would seem to suggest a moderate level of academic entitlement—on average. But there are large differences across the study body.

### Sense of Entitlement

In order to explore academic entitlement further, we present the questionnaire items in Table 2, and we also provide the percentage of students who responded ‘Fairly typical of me’ or ‘Very much typical of me’. As evident below, the number of students who identified with the questionnaire items varied. The most highly endorsed questions are two related to grades: “If I have worked very hard on an assignment, then I should be given a good mark for my efforts” and “If I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a 60%”. This finding is consistent with the findings of others who report a tendency for students to view high grades as being connected to effort, rather than achievement. Other questions with high to moderate levels of endorsement pertain to students’ expectations of professors and programs of study.

**Table 2 Questionnaire Items Related to Sense of Entitlement (% of respondents who responded ‘fairly typical of me’ or ‘very much typical of me’)**

| Question   | %    |
|--|------|
| If I have worked very hard on an assignment, then I should be given a good mark for my efforts.  | 53.0 |
| If I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a 60%.  | 51.0 |
| When I email an instructor I expect a quick response.  | 48.9 |
| It is up to the instructor to ensure that I don’t get bored in class.  | 38.5 |
| I shouldn’t be required to do an excessive amount of work in a given class.  | 29.1 |
| I shouldn’t be required to take courses that I don’t like.   | 26.6 |
| Professors have no right to be annoyed with me if I come late to class or leave early  | 26.2 |
| I should only have to take courses that I need to get the job I want.  | 25.9 |
| University should be set up in such a way to ensure that I get good grades so that I can get the job I want.   | 25.6 |
| A professor should be willing to lend me his/her course notes if I ask for them.   | 20.5 |
| If I have been very busy with what I think are worthwhile extracurricular activities, then I should be given an extension on assignment deadlines when needed. | 16.9 |
| A professor should let me turn in an assignment late.  | 16.3 |
| I feel I have been poorly treated if a professor cancels office hours on   | 16.1 |

|  |      |
|--|------|
| short notice.  |      |
| If I am not happy with my grade from last term, the professor should be obliged to let me do makeup work.  | 15.3 |
| I would think poorly of a professor who didn't respond the same day to an email I sent.  | 14.7 |
| Professors who won't let me take an exam at a different time because of my personal plans (e.g., a vacation or trip that is important to me) are too strict. | 13.2 |
| Professors often give me lower grades than I deserve.  | 12.1 |
| A professor should be willing to meet with me at a time that works well for me, even if inconvenient for the professor.                                      | 10.5 |
| If I am given lower marks than others in my class, it usually means that my instructor doesn't like me.  | 4.6  |

There was also considerable variation in students' scores on entitlement. Indeed, individual student scores varied from 1.0 (lowest possible, indicating that the entitlement questions were 'not at all typical' of the person) to 4.7. And, in fact, only 23 percent of respondents had a mean score great than 3.0. What is explored next is how entitlement intersects with learning styles—and this is where some of the generalizations in the popular press are confronted.

### **A Typology of Students**

Although students are sometimes classified by their dominant approach to learning, deep, surface and strategic learning are not attributes of individuals, as one person may use different approaches to varying degrees and according to circumstances. In order to explore the ways in which the three learning styles and academic entitlement combine for different students, we conducted a cluster analysis (K-means method) based on individual students' scores on the four scales. We explored the results for different numbers of clusters, settling on a typology with eight groups. At this point, the degree of homogeneity within each group and the distance between cluster centres was fairly high. For the sake of discussion, we have labeled each of the student groups that emerged from the analysis. They are listed in Table 3 from very low levels to very high levels of



entitlement. The cluster centres are expressed as Z-scores; negative values indicate scores that are below average, and positive values indicate scores that are above average.

Table 3 Typology of Students Based on Survey Responses

|                             |          | Cluster Centres (expressed as Z-scores) |                  |                    |                      |
|-----------------------------|----------|---|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Student Group               | % Sample | Deep Learning                           | Surface Learning | Strategic Learning | Sense of Entitlement |
| Relaxed student             | 14.8     | +0.07                                   | -0.73            | +0.49              | -1.01                |
| Student scholar             | 11.9     | +1.53                                   | -1.37            | +1.17              | -0.72                |
| Just puttin' in time        | 10.9     | -0.72                                   | -0.37            | -0.81              | -0.69                |
| Worker bee                  | 12.0     | -0.81                                   | +0.85            | -0.97              | -0.25                |
| Inquiring mind              | 13.3     | +0.76                                   | +0.22            | -0.35              | 0.00                 |
| Strategist                  | 19.2     | -0.13                                   | -0.14            | +0.59              | +0.50                |
| Memorizer with expectations | 9.8      | -1.17                                   | +1.11            | -0.93              | +1.00                |
| Driven to succeed           | 8.0      | +0.27                                   | +1.19            | +0.22              | +1.80                |

Four of the eight clusters have lower-than-average scores on the entitlement scale. Two of these have similar response patterns—very low levels of entitlement, high scores for strategic approaches to learning, and low endorsement of the questions related to surface learning—but they differ in their responses to the questions on deep learning. The first of these groups is referred to as the “relaxed student” and the second as the “student scholar”. Students in both groups take responsibility for their own learning and success, and they score well below average on both entitlement and surface learning. Where they differ is that relaxed students have average scores on deep learning, and they have above average scores on strategic learning, whereas student scholars score very highly on both these constructs. Both groups stand in stark contrast to the negative stereotypes of today’s students, and together they account for more than one-quarter of the sample.

Two other groups of students also have below average scores on sense of entitlement. One of these is described as “just puttin’ in time. These students score comparatively low on all three approaches to learning; some may be talented students who will complete their programs of study despite low levels of engagement, and others may be students who will not succeed in the long run. Either way, these students are not overly demanding of their professors or the university institution. The other group, labeled “worker bees”, scored the second highest of all groups on surface learning, and very low on deep and strategic learning. It is very likely that many of the “worker bee” students find university challenging, given their over-reliance on memory work, but again these students are focused on their own efforts—rather than expecting the post-secondary institution to cater to their individual expectations. These two groups, together, account for another one-quarter of the sample.

A fifth group of students is characterized by average scores on academic entitlement. This group accounts for 13.3% of the sample; they score high on deep learning (second highest of any group), and also sometimes engage in activities associated with surface learning, but they do not routinely approach their learning in strategic ways. We refer to this group as the “inquiring mind” because of their focus on understanding rather than strategies for high grades.

Only three of the eight groups scored highly on entitlement, and then to varying degrees. One group scored moderately high on both sense of entitlement and strategic learning and just below average on deep and surface learning. We refer to these students, who account for approximately 20% of the sample, as “strategists”. The other two groups—referred to as “memorizer with expectations” and “driven to succeed” scored high and very high, respectively, on sense of entitlement. The first of these two groups

represents students who rarely engage in deep or strategic approaches to learning, but rely heavily on memorization and effort. This group accounts for approximately 10% of the sample, and fits some of the negative stereotypes that have been created about entitled students. By contrast, the group with the highest scores on entitlement also scored above average on deep, surface and strategic approaches. These students, accounting for 8% of the sample, are labeled “driven to succeed” because they appear to place high expectations on themselves and on their professors and university as well. While they may be perceived by their instructors and peers as entitled, some of the students may well be the leaders of tomorrow.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper was motivated, in part, by the seemingly overly negative portrayal of today's post-secondary students. As such, it has a starting point that is similar to some of the research that has helped to debunk the myths of adolescence and emerging adulthood (c.f., Arnett, 2007). The research addresses two objectives.

The first objective was to develop a questionnaire instrument that would be short enough to administer in class but detailed enough to capture four constructs: sense of entitlement, deep learning, surface learning, and strategic learning. For the sense of entitlement scale, our final questionnaire included 12 of 15 questions developed by Greenberger et al. (2008) to measure academic entitlement (four were adopted verbatim, eight were adopted in modified form; three were not used—relating to cell phone use in class, telephone messages left for professors by students, and class readings, the latter because many programs rely more heavily on sample problems and laboratory work). To this, we added seven questions dealing with course selection and career goals, special arrangements for assignments, work load, grade achievement, and responsibility for in-class attention; these were based on media coverage and online blogs about student attitudes. For the three approaches to learning, we relied heavily on the ASSIST questionnaire developed by researchers in the U.K. Of the 51 questions that were included in the final questionnaire, 31 were taken directly from ASSIST and all the remaining questions were inspired by themes or questions therein. Given the results of the Cronbach alpha test, as well as the patterns of cross-tabulations between individual questions, it appears that the survey instrument comprises four valid scales.

The second objective was to explore students' approaches to learning, their sense of entitlement, and the intersection between learning styles and academic entitlement. The findings suggest that most students, even in first and second year, are serious about their studies and take responsibility for their own learning. However, a small minority of students does not appear to be engaged in the learning process; and a somewhat larger minority appears to be missing the tactics and attitudes necessary for engaging in deep learning.

Overall, we found that approaches to learning combine in complex ways with each other and with sense of entitlement. Using cluster analysis, we defined eight student groupings—only three of which are characterized by entitlement scores above 3 (on the five-point scale). Interestingly, these three groups are markedly different in their approaches to learning. One group, referred to as “driven to succeed”, scored very high on sense of entitlement, but also on deep, surface, and strategic learning. Those labeled “memorizers with expectations” scored high on academic entitlement, very high on surface learning, but very low on deep and strategic approaches to learning. Third, the “strategists” scored moderately high on academic entitlement and strategic learning, and just below average on deep and surface learning. As such, our results suggest that only a minority of students have what might be thought of as high levels of academic entitlement—and even amongst these students, many are highly engaged in their programs of study and may be more accurately thought of as ambitious rather than entitled.

One aspect of our findings that does conform to that of previous research pertains to students' grade expectations. Students highly endorsed questions that equated grades with effort. Much has been written about grade inflation, on one hand, and the pressure

for grades to gain admission to professions on the other hand. It is, perhaps, therefore not surprising that respondents to the current survey are strongly grade-focused. That said, there are strategies for encouraging even entitled student to refocus energies on the “appropriate standards of academic excellence and success” rather than on grades alone (Lippmann et al., 2009), and that is the shared responsibility of all those involved in postsecondary education.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire Items

### Items Related to Deep Learning

- When I'm studying, I try to look at the evidence carefully and reach my own conclusions.
- I try to relate ideas in lectures to other topics or other courses whenever possible.
- Often I find myself questioning things I hear in lectures or read in books.
- When I'm reading an article or book, I try to find out for myself exactly what the author means.
- It is important for me to be able to see the reasoning behind things.
- I never think about lectures when I'm doing other things. [reverse-coded]
- I struggle when the professor doesn't state exactly what we have to learn. [reverse-coded]
- I try to make sense of things by linking them to what I know already.
- When I read, I examine the details carefully to see how they fit with what's being said.
- When I'm working on a new topic, I try to see in my own mind how all the ideas fit together.
- I tend to accept what we've been taught without questioning it much. [reverse-coded]
- I like to play around with ideas of my own even if they don't get me very far.
- I don't think through topics for myself. I just rely on what we're taught. [reverse-coded]
- Before tackling a problem or assignment, I first try to work out what lies behind it.
- In making sense of new ideas, I often relate them to practical or real-life situations.
- When I am reading, I stop from time to time to reflect on what I am trying to learn from it.

### Items Related to Surface Learning

- I find I have to just memorize a good deal of what I have to learn.
- Whatever I'm working on, I generally push myself to make a good job it. [reverse-coded]
- I tend to do the minimum amount of work required to stay in my program.
- If I don't like a course, I generally find it hard to put a lot of effort into it.
- I often have trouble in making sense of things I have to remember.
- Often I find myself wondering whether the work I am doing here is really worthwhile.
- I'm not really sure what's important in lectures, so I try to get down all I can.
- I find that studying academic topics can be quite exciting at times.

- I gear my studying closely to just what seems to be required for assignments and exams.
- When I look back, I sometime wonder why I ever decided to come to university.
- Often I have to learn over and over things that don't really make much sense to me.
- I've just been going through the motions of studying without seeing where I'm going.
- I push myself to do the best I can whether or not I find the course to be interesting. [reverse-coded]
- There's not much of the work here that I find interesting or relevant.
- I concentrate on learning just those bits of information I have to know to pass.
- Much of what I'm studying makes little sense: it's like unrelated bits and pieces.

### Items Related to Strategic Learning

- When I am working on an assignment, I'm keeping in mind how best to impress the market.
- I have trouble balancing my studies with my social life. [reverse-coded]
- I work steadily through the term or semester, rather than leave it all until the last minute.
- I seldom attend review sessions put on by a professor or teaching assistant.
- I generally complete practice problems assigned.
- I tend to just do things without thinking about the best way to go about it. [reverse-coded]
- If my course offers tutorials, I attend most sessions.
- I tend to get down to work just before the deadline for submissions expires. [reverse-coded]
- I think about what I want to get out of a course to keep my studying well focused. [reverse-coded]
- If I have a problem with the course content that I can't solve myself, I ask the instructor for help.
- Before starting work on an assignment for exam question, I think first how best to tackle it.
- I tend to wait until the last minute to study for exams. [reverse-coded]
- I generally do not ask an instructor a question in or outside of class. [reverse-coded]
- If I've not understood things well enough when studying, I try a different approach.
- When I finish a piece of work, I check I through to see if it really meets the requirements.
- I'm good at following up on some of the reading or problem sets suggested

in class.

- I usually plan out my week's work in advance, either on paper or in my head.
- I think I'm quite systematic and organized when it comes to reviewing for exams.
- I look carefully at comments on graded course work to see how to get higher marks next time.