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Student Wellness and Academic Integrity: The Teaching Professor Conference

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The Teaching Professor Conference
New Orleans, LA
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Train-the-trainer

Abstract

The purpose of this blog is to document what I learned at The Teaching Professor 2023 Conference. The summary highlights sessions on student wellness in the classroom and designing quality assessments in online classes. I discuss the inherent contradiction between lowering student stress and maintaining academic integrity.

Keywords

The Teaching Professor 2023, academic integrity, student stress

The purpose of this blog is to document what I learned at The Teaching Professor 2023 Conference. The structure of the conference included opening and closing plenary sessions in addition to many concurrent sessions. While most concurrent sessions were one-hour long, there was one afternoon that featured 20-minute sessions. The conference focused on the struggles of the current generation of students (e.g., mental health issues), course structure and organization, and teaching effectiveness in online courses. Sessions were aimed at a multidisciplinary audience and were therefore appropriate for most college and university professors. The conference was excellent, and I highly recommend attendance for any professor interested in learning how to teach students more effectively. In this blog, I will highlight two lessons that I thought were particularly applicable to the current teaching environment.

The first session concerned **lowering students' stress in the classroom**. The presenter covered data on mental health challenges among college students and argued that we are in the midst of a mental health pandemic. Though stress can sometimes be a motivating force in college, too much stress tends to undermine learning. Moreover, one third of college students drop out of college due to mental health challenges, adding to the problem of low retention. The presenter gave four suggestions for lowering stress among students. The first suggestion was to avoid timed tests. Students frequently report timed tests to be stressful. Moreover, reasoning ability and speed show only small correlations. A second suggestion was to incorporate mastery learning. This means assessing material multiple times. He argued that students learn more when assessed repeatedly. The assessments should each reflect the same material but not be identical. The third suggestion was to simplify course design and instructions. Having due dates that always fall on Sundays is one example of how to simplify. Consistency and structure are the key concepts here. Finally, the speaker suggested that instructors communicate flexibility for student mental health challenges in the syllabus. One way of accomplishing this is to encourage students to contact the instructor if they are experiencing debilitating mental health concerns. While they will still need to complete all the work, the instructor may be able to find some

creative ways to make that easier given the students' challenges. Students should be encouraged to contact the instructor when issues arise, rather than at the end of the semester.

Another session that I thought was particularly useful concerned **designing quality assessments in online courses**. Unfortunately, online assessments can make cheating very tempting for students. In fact, one poster I viewed at the conference showed research on online students and found that most students cheat in online assessments using simple tools like Google. The session made it clear that the best way to thwart cheating is to create question groups to randomize the questions students will receive on any test or quiz. Clearly, the larger number of questions in any question group will make the assessment more secure. Shuffling answers on multiple-choice questions adds to the variance in structure of questions. Secondly, the speakers recommended using time limits on assessments. This limits the amount of time available for students to search for answers to questions or share questions with others taking the exam. A third suggestion was to limit the students' ability to see the correct answers to questions. This makes it difficult to share correct responses with others who have not yet taken the exam. Finally, it was recommended that students are only shown one question at a time. This feature can be used in conjunction with locking questions after the student answers. This prevents students from going back and changing answers on an exam. Though students do not tend to like this feature, it does make it difficult to look up answers.

The Teaching Professor conference was a valuable professional development experience. I was particularly inspired by the sessions on student wellness and online teaching. As you may have noticed while reading the summary above, there was contradictory advice given by different presenters. For example, timed tests are not advised when trying to reduce student stress. However, timed tests can be useful for thwarting cheating in online courses. This presents an intellectual challenge for instructors. Finding ways to manage student stress while maintaining academic integrity is crucial in the contemporary college classroom.