UTTyler ACADEMY OF DISTINGUISHED TEACHERS

Final Report

"Learning and Teaching from the Student Perspective – A Community Experience" at the University of Texas at Tyler September 23, 2025

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Abstract

This report presents a comprehensive synthesis of student feedback gathered during the forum "Learning and Teaching from the Student Perspective – A Community Experience" at UT Tyler. The findings highlight key factors influencing student engagement, effective teaching practices, and the role of faculty-student interactions both inside and outside the classroom. Students emphasize the importance of passionate, relatable instruction, clear and timely feedback, structured group collaboration, and accessible use of technology. Additionally, the value of mentorship and faculty presence beyond formal class time emerged as critical to enhancing the overall educational experience. These insights provide a foundation for the ADT committee to develop actionable strategies aimed at enriching teaching quality and fostering a supportive, engaging learning environment across the university.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes student perspectives gathered during the forum **"Learning and Teaching from the Student Perspective – A Community Experience"** at UT Tyler. The findings reflect rich insights into how students learn best, their classroom experiences, interaction with faculty, use of technology, group collaboration, and overall reflections on teaching and learning. These insights provide valuable guidance for the ADT committee to enhance teaching practices and student engagement across the university.

Key Findings:

1. **Learning Preferences and Engagement**
   Students thrive in classes where faculty demonstrate passion, enthusiasm, and connect material to real-world applications. Varied teaching methods—including storytelling, discussions, and timely feedback—foster intellectual curiosity and deeper learning. Students value opportunities to teach others and apply concepts practically.
2. **Classroom Experience and Faculty Interaction**
   A welcoming, energetic instructor who encourages dialogue and asks thought-provoking questions creates a comfortable environment for participation. Students appreciate clear instructions, relatable content, and faculty who avoid simple "yes" or "no" answers, instead fostering meaningful discussion.
3. **Assignments, Feedback, and Grading**
   Personalized, constructive feedback delivered promptly is critical for motivation and improvement. Students prefer written comments, short video feedback, and opportunities for revision supported by individual conferences. Assignments that connect to real-world goals and allow for self-reflection are most meaningful.
4. **Group Work and Peer Collaboration**
   Group projects are often challenging due to unequal effort and unclear expectations. Students prefer smaller groups or partner projects with clearly defined roles and norms. Instructor support through regular check-ins, accessible guidance, and contribution-based grading improves collaboration outcomes.

5. **Use of Technology and Course Materials**
   Canvas is the central platform for learning, valued for its organization and accessibility. Students favor PDF lecture materials for ease of use on personal devices and appreciate integration of external tools like Quizlet. There is notable skepticism about AI, with concerns about fairness and academic integrity.
6. **General Reflections and Suggestions**
   Students view education as a time for both academic and personal growth. Excellent professors are passionate, knowledgeable, and interactive, helping students connect classroom learning to career and life opportunities. Increased faculty involvement in highlighting extracurricular and leadership opportunities would enrich the student experience.
7. **Faculty Interaction Outside of Class**
   Faculty presence beyond the classroom is crucial for student engagement and mentorship but is underutilized by most students. Events like the forum are effective in fostering connection, and students suggest more informal opportunities and accessible office hours to encourage ongoing dialogue and support.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

To ensure all UT Tyler faculty benefit from these insights, a summary report incorporating these student perspectives alongside graphical data from the Mentimeter will be developed and published later this semester. This report will be hosted on the ADT website as a resource to support ongoing faculty development and enhance the student learning experience university-wide.

The ADT committee aims to use this feedback to create a clear, actionable pathway forward—promoting teaching practices that foster engagement, accountability, and meaningful connections inside and outside the classroom.

Key Categories and Questions

Category 1. How You Learn Best

1. What makes a class feel engaging or interesting to you?
2. When you think of a class you really enjoyed, what did the teacher do that helped you learn?
3. Do you spend much time thinking about how you are learning?
4. When do you know you have learned something well?

Category 2. Classroom Experience & Faculty Interaction

1. What makes you feel comfortable participating in class?

2. What's one thing a professor can do that makes you feel comfortable asking questions in class?
3. Where do you sit when you come into class?
4. How often do you ask questions in class?
5. When you think about the classes where you felt most engaged, what seemed to make that engagement possible?

Category 3. Assignments, Feedback, & Grading

1. What kind of feedback motivates you to improve?
2. What types of assignments feel most meaningful or relevant to your goals outside of school?
3. Do you talk with professors after they have graded your work?
4. When you do not do well on a particular assignment or text, do you try to figure out what went wrong and what you can do to improve next time?

Category 4. Group Work & Peer Collaboration

1. How could instructors better support students during team-based assignments?
2. What's the hardest part about group projects for you, and what would make it easier?
3. All employers stress that they need employees who can work well in teams. What are your own team or group work skills like?
4. When you are assigned team or group work, what role do you play? Do you help to get the work off to a start? Do you try to engage all of the team?

Category 5. Use of Technology & Course Materials

1. Are there any technologies or platforms that have made learning more difficult?
2. What's one website, app, or online tool you've used in class that worked really well — or really poorly?
3. Professors are required to build out Canvas sites and must post policy statements, learning objectives, detailed instructions for projects, yet it seems as though many students do not use the Canvas sites for their courses. Is this the case for you? If so, what keeps you from referring to the sites?

4. What about your own use of technology: do you use a tablet? Do you use note-taking apps, or ai for some of your work? Which ones work the best and what makes them the most useful?

Category 6. General Reflections & Suggestions

1. What makes a professor stand out as an excellent teacher?
2. If you could suggest one small change that would make the student experience more enjoyable, what would it be?
3. How seriously do you take your education? Do you think of it as just a series of hoops you have to jump through to get on the a career after college, or do you take this time to work on pre-professional skills, developmental tasks such as refining your self-knowledge, developing self-esteem and purpose?
4. Much of what a person learns in college takes place outside of the classroom, and much also depends upon students' willingness to reach out beyond themselves and to try new things, new ideas, meet new people. How active are you outside of the classroom?

Category 7: Faculty Interaction Outside of Class

1. How important is faculty presence outside of the classroom (e.g., in hallways, during office hours, at campus events, or via Zoom) to your overall experience and sense of connection on campus?
2. Do you avail yourself of your professors' office hours?
3. Do you seek any of your professors out for advice or conversation?
4. Do you consider any of your professors as role-models? If so, do you spend time getting to know them, asking them for advice or counsel?
5. Can you think of ways that the university might support more opportunities for students and professors to get to know each other outside of class?

Category 1: How You Learn Best Summary of Student Feedback

Students described engaging and effective learning environments as those where instructors bring passion, enthusiasm, and real-world relevance to the classroom. Classes that feel most impactful often include the following characteristics:

- **Instructor Engagement**: Students responded positively to teachers who are enthusiastic, tell real-life stories, and connect content to real-world applications. Passionate teaching was consistently highlighted as a key motivator for student engagement.
- **Relatable and Applicable Content**: Students value learning that feels relevant to their lives and future careers. Real-world examples and the ability to apply knowledge in practical ways (such as "go and do" opportunities) deepen understanding and retention.
- **Active and Collaborative Learning**: Interactive elements such as in-class discussions, small group work, and peer conversations enhance the learning experience. These activities allow students to share perspectives, reduce performance pressure, and learn from each other.
- **Clarity and Feedback**: Effective teachers provide clear rubrics, highlight key concepts, and offer feedback throughout the course—not just at the end. This helps students understand what is important and track their own progress.

- **Diverse Learning Strategies**: Students benefit from varied teaching methods and study strategies. Opportunities to teach others, engage in intellectual curiosity, and experience different classroom structures contribute to deeper learning.
- **Indicators of Engagement**: Non-verbal cues such as laughter, smiles, and ongoing conversations after class suggest strong student engagement. Participation in tools like Mentimeter and small group activities also supports active involvement.

Overall, students emphasized the importance of classrooms where they feel inspired, involved, and supported in understanding how they learn best.

Category 2: Classroom Experience & Faculty Interaction Summary of Student Feedback

Students emphasized that a comfortable and engaging classroom experience is shaped by both the physical environment and the instructor's demeanor and approach. The following elements contribute most significantly to positive classroom interactions:

- **Supportive and Encouraging Atmosphere**: Students feel most comfortable participating when the classroom environment is open, inclusive, and respectful. Instructors who are encouraging, approachable, and foster a sense of fun help reduce anxiety and promote engagement.
- **Intentional Questioning**: Students responded positively to instructors who ask thoughtful questions and then pause to allow time for reflection and responses. Rather than ending exchanges with a quick "yes" or "no," instructors who encourage dialogue and deeper thinking help create a space where students feel safe to ask questions and share ideas.
- **Instructor Presence and Energy**: Faculty members who demonstrate enthusiasm, provide clear instructions, and share personal experiences or interesting materials (such as relevant books) enhance student engagement. Energy and authenticity from the instructor set the tone for participation.
- **Stimulating Curiosity**: Students are more likely to engage when instructors leave questions open-ended or intentionally incomplete. This practice encourages students to think critically and remain curious throughout the lesson.

- **Physical Space and Seating**: Where students choose to sit impacts their experience. Some noted that sitting in the middle or front of the classroom affects their willingness to engage, though there was some hesitation about answering honestly. Overall, the layout and feeling of the space can influence comfort and participation.
- **Accessible Resources**: Providing after-class notes and access to PowerPoint slides was highlighted as a helpful way to reinforce learning and support students who may not feel comfortable asking questions in the moment.

In summary, students are more engaged when they feel welcomed, encouraged, and supported—both through the instructor's actions and the classroom environment itself.

Category 3: Assignments, Feedback, & Grading Summary of Student Feedback

Students emphasized the importance of timely, constructive, and personalized feedback in supporting their academic growth. Assignments that feel connected to real-world goals and provide space for individual learning are especially meaningful. Key themes included:

- **Constructive and Personalized Feedback**: Students find written feedback most helpful, especially when it is expressive, specific, and gives them time to process before the next assignment. Short video feedback (2–3 minutes) was mentioned as particularly motivating, as it allows instructors to model revision strategies and highlight strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Timeliness Matters**: Feedback is most effective when delivered promptly. Delayed responses can reduce its relevance and impact on future performance.
- **Revision Opportunities and One-on-One Support**: Students appreciate the chance to revise their work based on feedback, particularly when accompanied by individual conferences for major assignments. These conversations offer clarity and foster a deeper connection with the material.
- **Meaningful Assignments**: Research projects, essays, and written assignments that connect to students' interests or future careers are considered the most valuable. Diagnostic study tools, such as modules in nursing programs, also support learning by identifying gaps and reinforcing key concepts.

- **Assessment Flexibility**: Some students value grading structures that include options like dropping the lowest test grade, which can reduce pressure and allow for occasional setbacks.
- **Skepticism Around Group Work**: Group projects were generally viewed unfavorably, especially when accountability and contribution are uneven. Students expressed a preference for assignments where individual learning and performance can be clearly measured.
- **Reflection After Grading**: While some students review feedback and compare results after receiving grades, others admitted to moving on quickly. Those who do reflect often look for patterns and areas to improve, especially when feedback is constructive.

In summary, students are most motivated by relevant, individualized feedback and assignments that connect to their long-term goals. Opportunities for revision and reflection further enhance their ability to improve and succeed.

Category 4: Group Work & Peer Collaboration Summary of Student Feedback

Students broadly expressed frustration with group work, citing unequal effort and lack of clarity as recurring challenges. However, they also recognized the value of collaboration when it is structured intentionally and supported by clear expectations and instructor involvement. Key points include:

- **Concerns About Equity and Accountability**: Nearly all students shared negative experiences with group projects, primarily due to uneven contributions among group members. These challenges are often compounded by unclear expectations and limited instructor oversight.
- **Preference for Smaller or Partner-Based Projects**: Students generally preferred working in pairs or small groups over larger teams. Partner projects—especially with self-selected partners—were seen as more manageable and effective for collaboration.
- **Clear Norms and Structure**: Students recommended that group projects begin with a collaboratively developed set of norms and expectations. Defining roles, responsibilities, and ground rules up front could help reduce misunderstandings and improve accountability.
- **Instructor Support and Availability**: Faculty can better support group work by being available to answer questions, checking in regularly, and providing structure. This includes setting deadlines for project milestones, breaking larger assignments into smaller, manageable components, and establishing grading models based on individual contributions.

- **Lead Time and Planning**: Students emphasized the importance of having adequate time to start and complete group projects. Early planning, clear timelines, and regular check-ins help prevent last-minute work and uneven division of labor.
- **More Effective Collaboration Formats**: Alternatives such as think-pair-share or small breakout discussions (pull-out groups) were viewed more favorably. These formats encourage collaboration without the logistical and interpersonal issues that often accompany large group assignments.

In summary, while students understand the importance of teamwork skills, they are more likely to succeed and engage in group work when it is well-structured, transparent, and allows for individual accountability. Instructor involvement and flexibility in group formation are essential to improving the overall experience.

Category 5: Use of Technology & Course Materials Summary of Student Feedback

Students reported a wide range of experiences with educational technologies and course materials. While many tools and platforms are seen as helpful, students emphasized the need for clarity, consistency, and accessibility in how course content is shared. The following themes emerged:

- **Canvas as a Central Hub**: Most students rely on Canvas as their primary learning platform. They expressed a strong preference for courses where all materials—syllabi, handouts, presentation slides, deadlines, and links—are clearly organized and accessible in one place. When Canvas is well-structured, it enhances the learning experience.
- **Preference for PDF Materials**: Students find PDF versions of lecture slides or notes particularly helpful. PDFs are easy to access on mobile devices and allow for in-class following and post-class review. Scanned notes or annotated slide decks posted after class also support learning and note-taking.
- **Desire for Transparency and Structure**: Students appreciate clear instructions and the ability to follow along during class using digital materials. They also value having all course documents and tools posted early and organized sequentially.
- **Use of Personal Devices and Note-Taking Apps**: Many students rely on their own laptops or tablets, along with digital note-taking tools, as their most effective learning resources. These tools offer flexibility and personalization in how students process course content.

- **Incorporation of External Tools**: Students supported the integration of helpful third-party tools such as Canva and Quizlet, particularly when linked directly through Canvas. These tools can enhance understanding and provide varied study methods.
- **Concerns About PowerPoint Dependence**: Students were critical of lectures that relied too heavily on one-sided PowerPoint presentations without opportunities for interaction or application.
- **Skepticism Toward AI Tools**: Students expressed overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward the use of AI for academic work. Some perceived AI use as a form of cheating, particularly when it leads to higher grades without comparable effort. Others reported limited experience or unfamiliarity with how AI tools function.

In summary, students value well-organized, accessible, and interactive course materials supported by consistent use of Canvas. While technology can enhance learning, it must be thoughtfully integrated to avoid becoming a barrier or point of confusion.

Category 6: General Reflections & Suggestions Summary of Student Feedback

Students shared thoughtful reflections on what defines an excellent professor, how they approach their education, and what could enhance the overall college experience. Their responses revealed a strong interest in personal growth, meaningful connection, and support that extends beyond the classroom. Key insights include:

- **What Makes an Excellent Teacher**:
  Students consistently described standout professors as **passionate, knowledgeable, and engaging**. The most effective instructors demonstrate excitement for their subject matter, connect content across disciplines, and integrate personal stories to make material relatable. Interactivity, clarity, and an openness to student input were also emphasized as qualities that set excellent educators apart.

- **Taking Education Seriously**:
  Most students reported taking their education seriously—not just as a path to a degree, but as a time for **pre-professional development and personal growth**. They see college as an opportunity to refine their goals, build self-awareness, and gain skills that will prepare them for life beyond graduation.

- **Connecting Learning to Life**:
  Students appreciate when faculty help them connect classroom learning to real-life applications or opportunities. This includes exposure to **outside organizations**, leadership opportunities, and campus involvement that help develop interpersonal and career-related skills. Suggestions included creating a **Canvas module or resource** that introduces students to available extracurricular and professional organizations.

- **Exploration and Purpose**:
  Many students described using general education or early coursework to explore their interests and clarify their goals. They expressed a desire for support in navigating this process, especially from instructors who "light the fire" of curiosity and help guide students toward meaningful academic or career paths.

- **Suggestions for Improvement**:
  One small but meaningful change suggested was increased faculty involvement in helping students **connect classroom content to outside resources or communities**. This includes highlighting relevant organizations, events, or opportunities for leadership and skill-building.

- **Out-of-Class Engagement**:
  Student involvement outside the classroom varied, but those who were more active expressed appreciation for how extracurriculars support broader learning and personal development. They acknowledged that learning happens through new experiences and relationships formed on campus.

In summary, students value passionate teaching, holistic educational experiences, and opportunities to grow both academically and personally. Supporting students in making meaningful connections—between coursework, personal goals, and the larger campus community—can significantly enhance their overall experience.

Category 7: Faculty Interaction Outside of Class Summary of Student Feedback

Students emphasized the critical role faculty presence outside the classroom plays in fostering a sense of connection, mentorship, and engagement on campus. While most recognize the value of these interactions, few reported consistently taking advantage of opportunities such as office hours or informal conversations. Key themes included:

- **Importance of Faculty Presence**:
  Students expressed that seeing professors around campus—in hallways, at events, or via virtual platforms—significantly enhances their overall educational experience and feeling of belonging. Informal interactions and faculty visibility contribute to a supportive learning environment.
- **Mentorship and Relationship Building**:
  Many students identified mentorship as especially valuable, highlighting the impact of faculty who demonstrate passion, share personal stories, and relate course material to real-world applications. These relationships can inspire, clarify career goals, and satisfy intellectual curiosity.
- **Barriers to Engagement Outside Class**:
  Despite the acknowledged importance, only a small number of students regularly seek out

professors beyond class time. Some students may be unsure how to initiate these interactions or may not feel fully comfortable attending office hours or events.

- **Suggestions for Enhancing Opportunities**:
  Students recommended expanding structured events like this forum, which were seen as effective ways to connect with faculty. Additional ideas include informal gatherings, mentorship programs, or more accessible office hours to encourage interaction.
- **Supporting Diverse Learning and Social Needs**:
  Students noted that faculty who provide clear instructions, relevant real-world examples, and open discussion help create an environment conducive to both academic success and personal growth. Small classroom settings and interactive activities further promote connection.
- **Positive Faculty Qualities**:
  Attributes such as passion, relatability, enthusiasm, and willingness to provide timely feedback were repeatedly mentioned as qualities that make faculty approachable and inspiring outside the classroom.

In summary, while students highly value faculty engagement beyond lectures, increased efforts to promote and facilitate these connections are needed. Enhancing informal and formal opportunities for interaction can strengthen mentorship, deepen learning, and build a more connected campus community.

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Invitation

Thank You