An empirical investigation of
student satisfaction with college courses

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between the organizational behavior concept of job satisfaction and student satisfaction with college courses. It reports on a survey of 560 students on attitudes related to aspects of college courses including views on faculty, interaction and communication, the course, the physical learning environment, and college facilities and services. In post-secondary education, student satisfaction is both an outcome of the learning process as well as a requirement for successful learning. Student satisfaction is linked to improved academic performance, continued learning (Sloan, n.d.), the decision to take additional classes (Booker & Rebmon, 2005) and the recruitment of future students.

Keywords: student satisfaction

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

"Student satisfaction reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience. The goal is that all students who complete a course express satisfaction with course rigor and fairness, with professor and peer interaction, and with support services" (Sloan, 2010)

The National Center for Education Statistics (Hussar and Bailey, 2013) report 2012 is likely to set a new record for the number of students attending college: 21.6 million, an increase of about 6.2 million since 2000. About 8 million students are expected to attend public 4-year institutions (NCES, 2013). The increase is due in part to population increases in the 18- to 24-year age group as well as rising enrollment rates, and some ethic groups will see increasing numbers and percentages of enrollment that align more closely with their share of overall population. Projected enrollments in post-secondary degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2103) are related to projections of populations, disposable income, and unemployment rates (p.19).

Although distance learning is outpacing enrollment growth at traditional institutions of higher education (Sloan, 2010), the larger percentage of students continue to take classes in a traditional face-to-face setting. Allen and Seaman (2011) report 31% of all higher education students now take at least one course online. This implies as many as 69% now take at least one course in a traditional face-to-face setting.

This paper explores the relationship between the organizational behavior concept of job satisfaction and student satisfaction with college courses. In post-secondary education, student satisfaction is both an outcome of the learning process as well as a requirement for successful learning. Student satisfaction is linked to improved academic performance, continued learning (Sloan, n.d.), the decision to take additional classes (Booker & Rebmon, 2005) and the recruitment of future students.

Student Satisfaction

The Sloan Consortium defines student satisfaction: "Students are successful in the learning experience and are pleased with their experience" (Moore, 2009, p. 74). Sweeney and Ingram (2001) define student satisfaction as "the perception of enjoyment and accomplishment in the learning environment" (p. 57). These definitions focus on accomplishment and success in learning, and pleasure and enjoyment with the experience.

The research on student satisfaction identifies a number of factors including perception of faculty knowledge and performance (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Elliott & Shin, 2002), interaction (Cao, Griffin & Bai, 2009; Wu, Tennyson & Hsia, 2010), communication (Parayitam, Desai & Phelps, 2007; Wuensch, Azia, Kishore & Tabrizi, 2008), the learning environment (Beard & Harper, 2002), and the university image and value (Alves & Raposo, 2007) that lead to higher satisfaction. The literature on student satisfaction is linked to institutional concern for the quality of courses and programs and the need to understand student perceptions, and includes research on student satisfaction with traditional, hybrid, and online courses for graduate and undergraduate students.

Job Satisfaction

The field of organizational behavior focuses on factors that influence job satisfaction for the purpose of improving worker satisfaction and thereby improving job performance. Organizational behavior and postsecondary education have similar desired outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction and student satisfaction, job performance and student performance, employee retention and student retention). Both job satisfaction and student satisfaction imply a positve feeling or sense of enjoyment, as well as a sense of accomplishment, and numerous factors that relate to job satisfaction also relate to student satisfaction.

The research on job satisfaction identifies a number of organizational elements including supervision, relationships, work conditions, and policy and administration (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959), as well as meaningfulness of work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), and feedback and rewards (Locke & Latham, 1990) as factors associated with higher employee motivation, higher satisfaction, higher performance, lower absenteeism, and lower turnover.

Locke (1976) defines job satisfaction as "The pleasurable emotional state resulting from the perception of one's job as fulfilling or allowing the fulfillment of one's important job values" (p. 1342). Claiming that some people love to work while others do not and work only because they must, Spector (1997) defines job satisfaction as "the degree to which people like their jobs" (p. vii). A commonly accepted definition of job satisfaction is "a positive feeling about one's job resulting from an evaluation of its characteristics" (Robbins & Judge, 2009, p. 31).

Noting that job satisfaction is "one of the most frequently studied concepts in work and organizational psychology", research on job satisfaction has been characterized as "one of the most theory-free concepts measured against methodological standards in the field of organizational research." (Bussing, Bissels, Fuchs & Perrar, 1999, p. 1000). In this respect, research on job satisfaction is similar to research on student satisfaction that commonly uses atheoretical attitude-based questionnaires to measure satisfaction.

Previous research on potential links between job satisfaction and student satisfaction identifies determinants of student satisfaction in five categories: institution, learning environment, course, faculty, and interaction/communication (Sinclaire, 2011). DeShields et al. (2005) report faculty characteristics and class characteristics to be key factors that influence student satisfaction with college courses. Elliott and Shin (2002) report classroom environment factors to be related to student satisfaction with college courses. Wuensch et al. (2008) identifies eleven pedagogical characteristics of college courses that includes faculty and communication factors in addition to course organization and evaluation factors.

METHODS

A confirmatory survey was operationalized using items identified as relevant by Elliott and Shin (2002), DeShields et al. (2005) and Weunsch et al. (2008). See Table 1 in Appendix A. To assess the face validity of the survey form, the items were reviewed by business management faculty. The survey demonstrated high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of 0.93. The survey appears as Appendix C at the end of this article.

Participants

The study was conducted with students from a public university in the Southeast region of the United States. The survey was delivered via the Internet to undergraduate students pursuing business degrees. Demographic data used for comparisons include age, gender and ethnicity. See Table 2 in Appendix A. The sample consisted of 560 participants, with more males ($n = 331$) than females ($n = 229$) that were mostly young (74% in the 18- to 24-year age group), White American (71%), full-time (93%) students. The sample population differs from the institutional population as a result of using a convenience sample of participants enrolled in computer and information technology courses. At the institutional level, women comprise 60% of the population and men comprise 40% of the population.

RESULTS

A 5-point Likert-type scale was used for participants to indicate their attitudes and preferences related to characteristics of college courses, where numbers closer to 1 represented favorability toward unimportant, and numbers closer to 5 represented favorability toward very important.

Items rated as important or very important may be characterized as having high importance (HI), whereas items rated as unimportant or of little importance may be characterized as having low importance (LI). The survey provided a rating of moderately important (MI). Course characteristics are organized into five categories: institution, learning environment, course content, faculty, and interaction/communication factors.

Institutional Factors

How important are college facilities and services to student satisfaction with a college course? See Figure 1 in Appendix B. When asked, "Which facilities or services are rated as important or very important (HI)?" students report:

87% for cost of tuition, fees
85% for campus safety
80% for support services (tutoring, financial aid)
78% for access to parking
77% for easy to get to class
74% for career counseling
62% for general services (cafeteria, bookstore)
46% for social opportunities (sororities, fraternities, sports, networking)

Learning Environment

Class Size

What size class contributes most to student satisfaction with a college course? See Figure 2 in Appendix B. Results show students prefer small class size. In this study, 50% prefer class with 12 to 20 students, while 36% percent prefer class with 21 to 35 students. Fewer than 4% prefer class with 36 to 50 students, and less than 1% prefer class with more than 50 students.

Only 8% of the students who participated in this study prefer very small classes with fewer than 12 students.

Class Time

What class time contributes most to student satisfaction with a college course? See Figure 3 in Appendix B. In this study, over 69% prefer morning class, 8 to 11 am, while over 25% prefer afternoon class. Only 5% of the students who participated in this study prefer evening class.

Class Frequency

Which schedule of classes contributes most to student satisfaction with college course? See Figure 4 in Appendix B. In this study, over 52% prefer class that meets two times per week, while over 43% prefer class that meets three times per week. Fewer than 4% prefer class that meets one time per week.

Classroom Environment

See Figure 5 in Appendix B. When asked to consider classroom environment factors, which are rated as important or very important (HI)? Students report:
95% for good visibility to instructor and course material
78% for limited outside interference, interruptions, noise
75% for clean comfortable uncrowded classroom.
61% for attentive and participative classmates

Methods of Instruction

On a scale of unimportant to very important, what methods of instruction are rated important or very important (HI)? See Figure 6 in Appendix B.
87% for lecture-demonstration
75% for lecture
64% for class discussion
59% for self-directed, self-paced earning (complete assignments, test at own pace)
47% for textbook assignments
38% for individual student project
32% for small group discussion
30% for group project
25% for individual student presentation
24% for group presentation
22% for library research

Instructor Characteristics and Behaviors

On a scale of unimportant to very important, how important are instructor characteristics and behaviors to student satisfaction with a college course? Which characteristics or behaviors are rated as important or very important? See Figure 7 in Appendix B.

98% for helpful
98% has working knowledge of the subject
95% for interested in student learning
94% for interested and passionate about the subject
93% for has practical experience in the subject
93% for prompt to answer email
92% for accessible and available when needed
79% for engages students in class discussion

Learning Technology

How important are various learning technologies to student satisfaction with a college course? Which technologies are rated as important or very important? See Figure 8.

79% for use of Blackboard/other technologies for assignments, communication
76% for use of the Internet/videos/electronic media for classroom and/or assignments
72% for use of Microsoft® PowerPoint for presentations
45% for availability of electronic textbooks

Methods of Grading

How important are various assessment methods to student satisfaction with a college course? Which methods are rated as important or very important (HI)? See Figure 9. The study found somewhat equal preferences (e.g., equal across LI, MI, HI) on four methods of grading: individual student presentations, comprehensive final exams, group assignments, and peer evaluations. See Figure 10.

79% for chapter tests
79% for attendance
69% for class participation
63% for quizzes
58% for individual problem assignments
43% for individual writing assignments
34% for individual presentations
30% for comprehensive final exams
30% for group problem assignments
29% for group presentations
22% for group writing assignments

Course Subject

On a scale of unimportant to very important, which course subject characteristics are rated as important or very important (HI)?
87% for student interest in subject
87% for student perception that subject applies to work or profession
78% for course is in students' major field of study
54% for students' previous knowledge of subject

All Factors

When asked, "How important is each item to your overall satisfaction with a college course?", students rated these factors as important or very important (HI). See Figure 12 in Appendix B that depicts ten relevant factors from highest to lowest rating. Five out of ten factors are rated important or very important by more than 80% of the students who participated in this study.
93% for instructor
89% for methods of instruction
86% for methods of grading
86% for course subject
82% for classroom environment
75% for learning technology
72% for class time
70% for class frequency
67% for college facilities and services
64% for class size
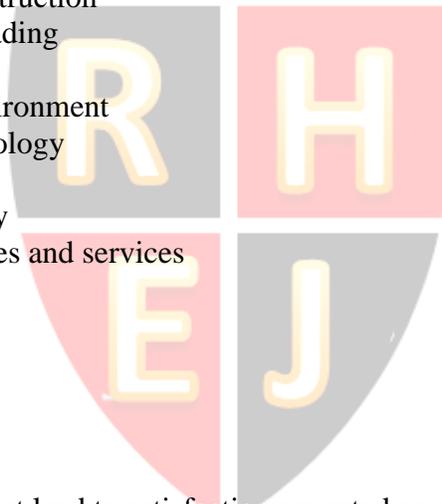
Differences

Gender

Preference indicators that lead to satisfaction are rated as unimportant or of little importance (L = Low importance), moderately important (M), or important or very important (H = High importance). Results show significant Pearson chi-square values indicating an association between gender and five of ten factors that contribute to student satisfaction: class time, class frequency, learning technology, methods of instruction, and methods of grading. See Table 4.

In this study, female students rated class time as having higher importance than did male students, χ^2 (2, $N = 557$) = 11.306, $p = .004$. Over 80% of females rated class time as important or very important versus 68% for males. Females rated class frequency as having higher importance than did males, χ^2 (2, $N = 558$) = 6.274, $p = .043$, with 76% of females rating frequency as important or very important (HI) versus 66% for males. Females rated learning technology higher than males, χ^2 (2, $N = 558$) = 17.571, $p = .000$, with 84% of females rating learning technology as important or very important (HI) versus 69% for males. Females rated methods of instruction higher than males, χ^2 (2, $N = 558$) = 15.315, $p = .000$, with 96% of females rating methods of instruction as important or very important (HI) versus 84% of males.

Females rated methods of grading higher than males, χ^2 (2, $N = 557$) = 8.371, $p = .015$, with 92% of females rating methods of grading as important or very important (HI) versus 83% of males.

Additionally, ratings on options for class duration and frequency show significant Pearson chi-square values such that females showed preference for 75-minute classes held two times per week, χ^2 (2, $N = 559$) = 17.121, $p = .000$, with 63% of women showing favor for 75-minute classes compared to 46% of men. Fifty-one percent of men indicated a preference for 50-minute classes held three times per week versus 34% of women.

Race/Ethnicity

Results show significant Pearson chi-square values indicating an association between race/ethnicity and three factors that contribute to student satisfaction: college facilities and services, class size, and class time.

Over 81% of African American students rated college facilities and services as important or very important, χ^2 (4, $N = 555$) = 12.137, $p = .016$, versus 64% for White Americans and 73% for other ethnicities (Asian, Hispanic, other).

Ratings on class size show significant differences by ethnic group, χ^2 (8, $N = 558$) = 26,280, $p = .001$, such that 53% of African American students prefer class with 21 to 35 students versus 32% for White American students and 45% for other ethnicities (Asian, Hispanic, other), while 40% of African American students prefer class with 12 to 20 students versus 54% for White American students and 40% for other ethnicities (Asian, Hispanic, other). See Table 6.

Ratings on class time show significant differences between ethnic groups, χ^2 (4, $N = 558$) = 12.211, $p = .016$, such that 7% of White American students indicate a preference for evening classes versus 0% for African American students and 0% for other ethnicities (Asian, Hispanic, other).

Limitations

Although this study provides insight into factors that determine student satisfaction with a college course, the interpretation of results is subject to several limitations and assumptions. One limitation is related to the self-report survey methodology, and assumptions are related to measurement factors due to the use of an attitude survey based on previous research. Also limiting the generalizability of the results is that participants are a convenience sample of students enrolled in business courses at one university.

DISCUSSION

These findings have several implications for institutions of higher education that seek to improve student satisfaction. In post-secondary education, student satisfaction is linked to improved academic performance, continued learning (Sloan, n.d.), the decision to take additional classes (Booker & Rebmon, 2005) and the recruitment of future students.

In this study, factors relating to perceived faculty characteristics and methods of communication and interaction (i.e., methods of instruction, methods of grading) are rated highly in relation to student satisfaction with a college course, with 97% of participants rating faculty characteristics as HI (important or very important), 89% rating methods of instruction as HI, and 86% rating methods of grading as HI.

The specific perceived faculty characteristics rated as important or very important are helpfulness (98%), having a working knowledge of the subject (98%), interested in student learning (95%), interested and passionate about the subject (94), having practical experience in the subject (93%), prompt to answer email (93%), and accessible and available when needed (92%). See figure 7 for highly rated instructor characteristics and behaviors that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.

Additionally, 86% of students surveyed in this study rated student-oriented course factors (i.e., student interest in subject, perception that course subject applies to work or profession, course in student major) as important or very important.

Results show significant gender differences on five factors: class time, class frequency, learning technology, methods of instruction, and methods of grading. A higher percentage of female students rate each of these factors as HI (important or very important) compared to ratings by male students.

Results show significant differences in ratings by race/ethnicity for three factors that contribute to student satisfaction: college facilities and services, class size, and class time. A higher percentage of African American students (81%) rated college facilities and services as important or very important compared to White Americans (64%). Additional significant differences were found for class size by race/ethnicity with a higher percentage of African American students indicating a preference for classes with 21 to 35 students while a higher percentage of White American students reported a preference for classes with 12 to 20 students.

Preferences based on race/ethnicity relating to facilities and services, class size, and class time may become more important in the future given that research by Hussar and Bailey (2013) predicts differences in enrollment based on race/ethnicity such that increases for students who are African American and Hispanic will far surpass increases in enrollment for students who are White American. Enrollment increases are predicted at 4% for White American students, 25% for African American students, 42% for Hispanic students, and 20% for Asian students.

The results of this study provide insight into student perceptions and satisfaction drivers and may be of interest to instructors interested in designing courses wherein learning goals are achieved by maximize course characteristics that students rate highly while minimizing factors that students do not rate highly. This approach may be attractive to universities that adopt a "market-in" approach to enrollment (Driscoll & Wicks, 1998) in which students are customers and education is the product.

Future research could look at student satisfaction scores and instructor evaluation scores with teaching and grading methods as independent variables to determine if instructors who use a set of teaching and grading methods perceived as important and very important (HI) score higher on student evaluations than instructors who use teaching and grading methods rated as moderately important (MI) or of low importance (LI).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX A

Table 1

Summary of survey categories and number of survey items

Determinants of student satisfaction	Survey category	Number of survey items
Institution	College facilities and services	8
Learning environment	Class size, time, frequency	3
	Classroom environment	4
Course factors	Course subject	4
Faculty	Instructor	8
Interaction / communication factors	Methods of instruction	11
	Methods of grading	12
	Learning technology	4

Table 2

Summary of demographic characteristics

Age				Class			
Age	18-24	412	74%	**Class**	Freshman	37	7%
	25-34	101	18%		Sophomore	68	12%
	35-44	26	5%		Junior	276	49%
	45 and over	21	4%		Senior	154	28%
					Graduate	19	3%
Gender	Female	229	41%		Other	6	1%
	Male	331	59%				
				Race/	Asian	62	11%
Status	Full-time	520	93%	**Ethnicity**	Black/African American	81	14%
	Part-time	40	7%		Hispanic/Latino	7	1%
					White American	395	71%
					Other	15	3%

Table 3

Summary of factors rated as important or very important by category.

Determinants of student satisfaction	Category	Rated as important or very important
Institution	College facilities, services	67%
Learning environment	Class size	64%
	Class time	72%
	Class frequency	70%
	Classroom environment	82%
Course factors	Course subject	86%
Faculty	Instructor	97%
Interaction/communication	Methods of instruction	89%
	Methods of grading	86%
	Learning technology	75%

Table 4

Significant differences on five factors associated with student satisfaction.

Factor	Gender	Rated HI: Important or Very Important
Class time	Females	80%
	Males	68%
Class frequency	Females	76%
	Males	66%
Learning technology	Females	84%
	Males	69%
Methods of instruction	Females	96%
	Males	84%
Methods of grading	Females	92%
	Males	83%

Table 5

Significant differences on preference for class duration and frequency

Class Duration and Frequency	Female	Male
3 times/wk, 50 min. class	34%	51%
2 times/wk, 75 min. class	63%	46%
1 time/wk, 3 hr. class	3%	3%

Table 6

Significant differences on preference for class duration and frequency

Class Size	African American	White American	Other Ethnicity
Fewer than 12	2%	9%	6%
12 to 20	40%	54%	40%
21-35 students	53%	32%	45%
35-50 students	5%	3%	8%
More than 50	0%	1%	0%

APPENDIX B
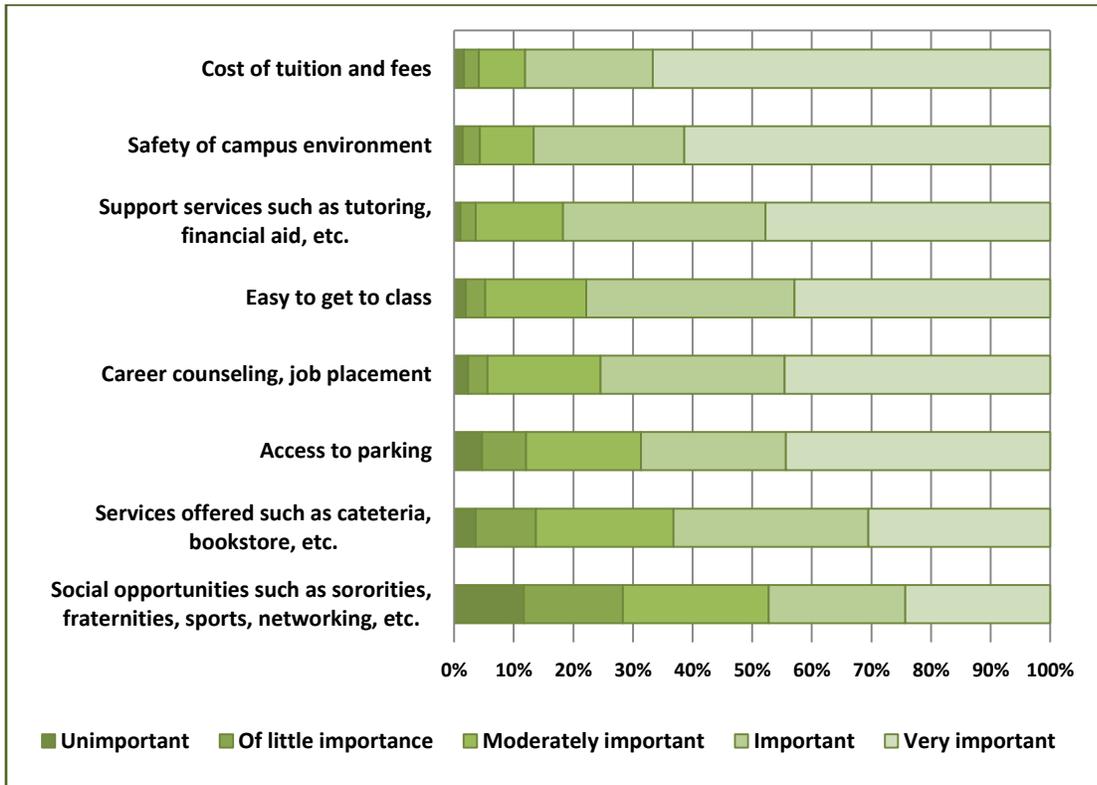
Figure 1. College facilities and services that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
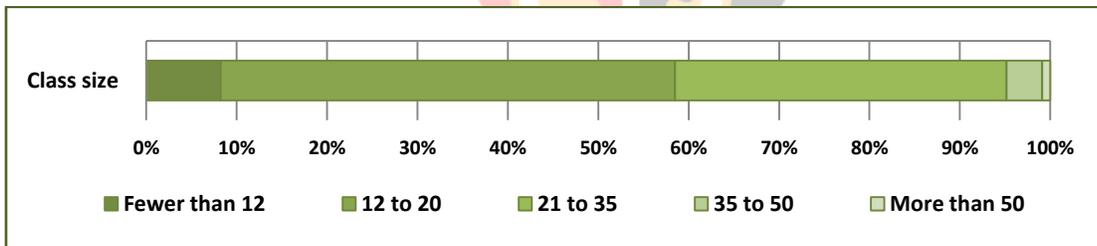
Figure 2. Class size that contributes to student satisfaction with a college course.
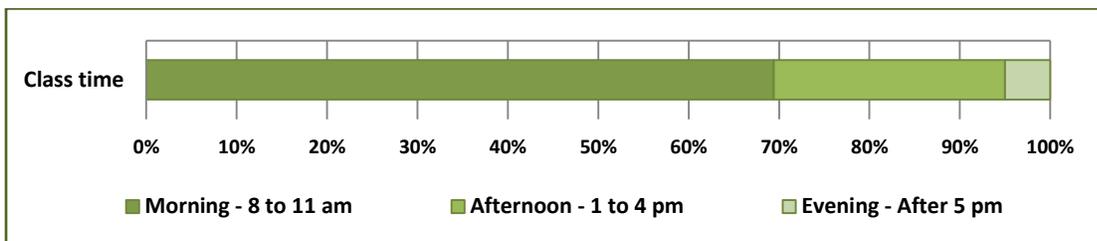
*Figure 3.* Class time that contributes to student satisfaction with a college course.
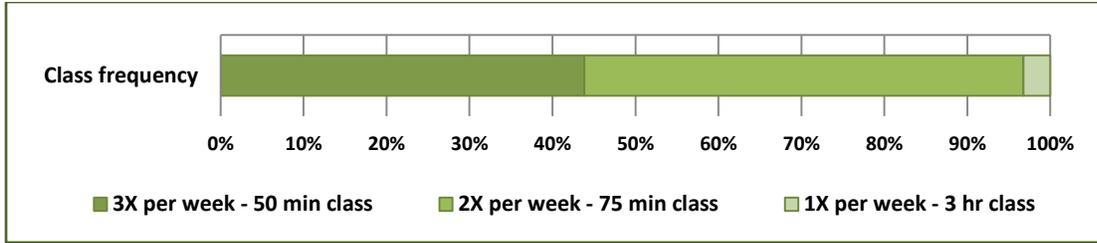
*Figure 4.* Class schedule that contributes to student satisfaction with a college course.
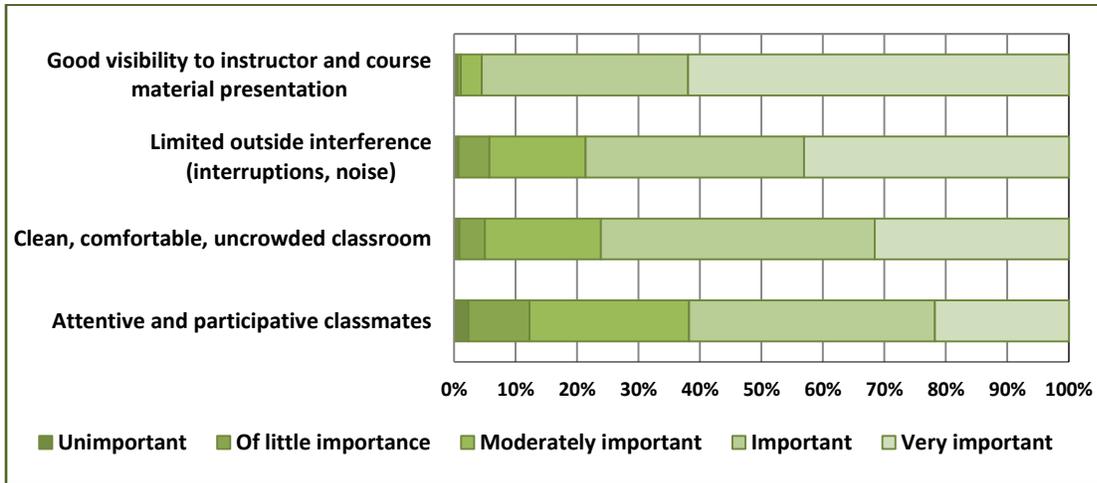
Figure 5. Classroom factors that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
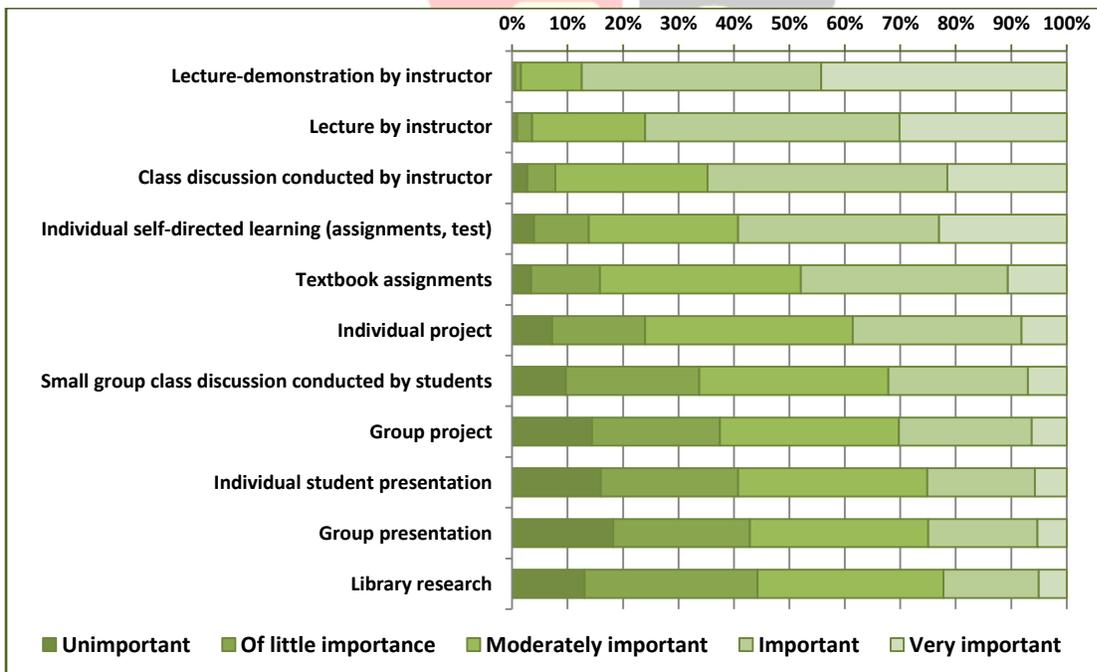
Figure 6. Methods of instruction that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
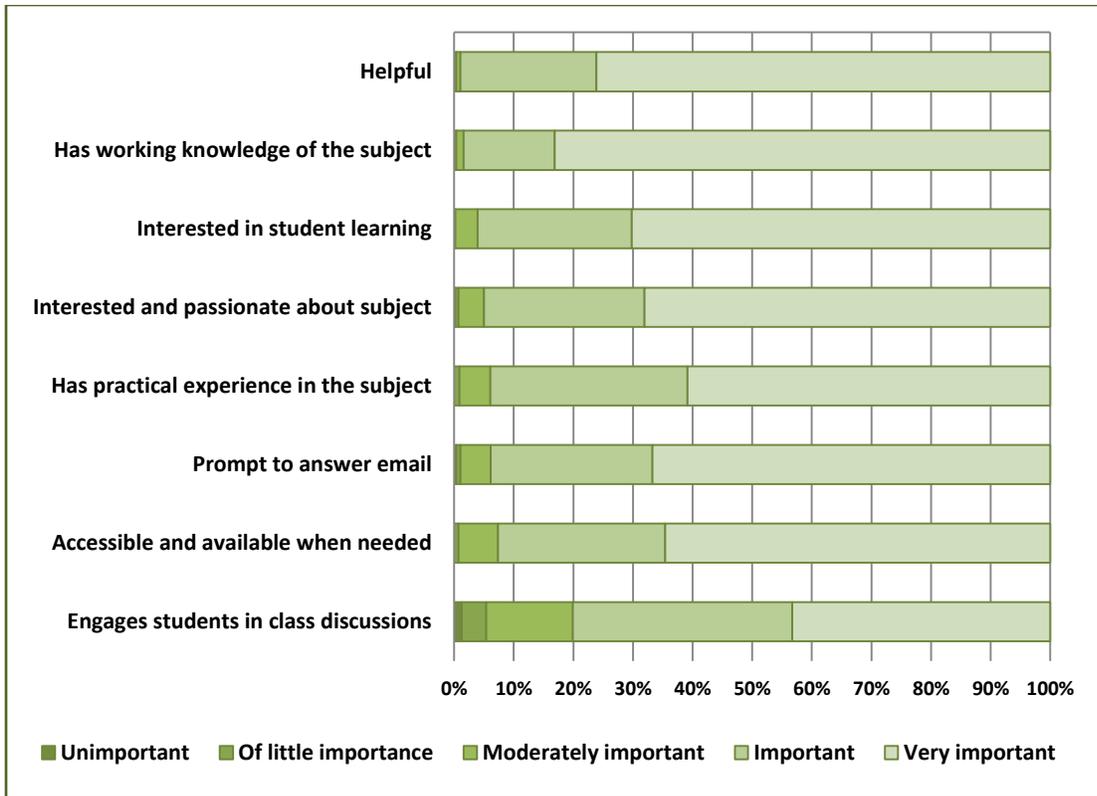
*Figure 7.* Instructor characteristics and behaviors that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
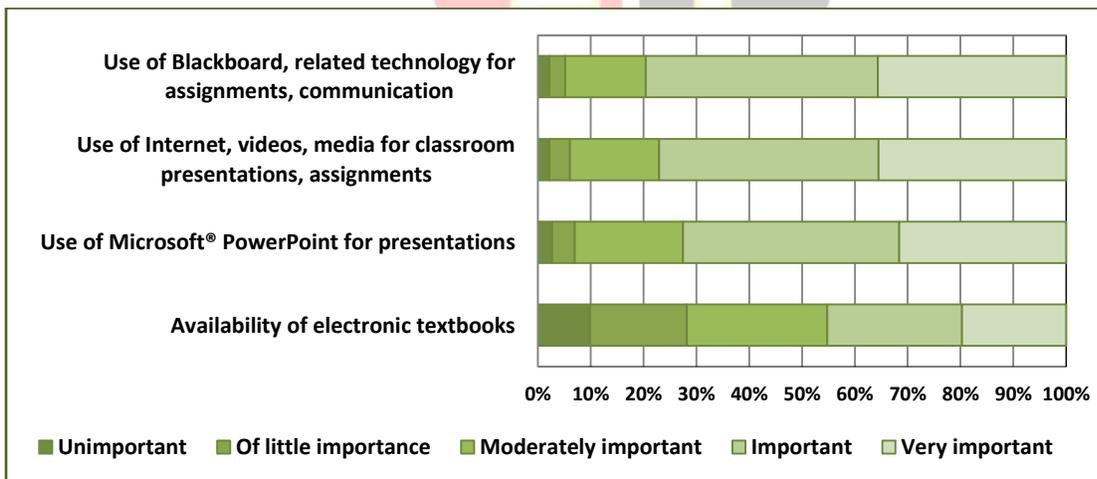
Figure 8. Learning technologies that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
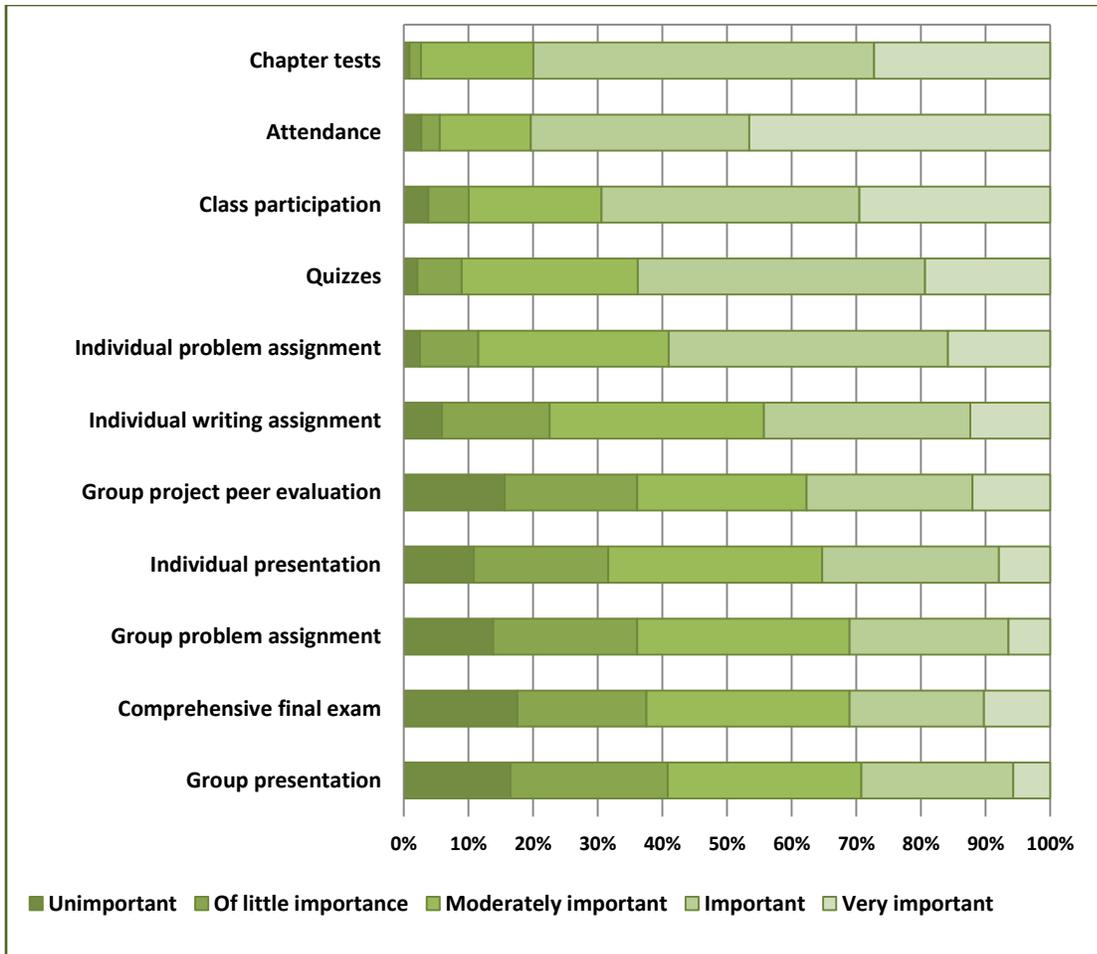
Figure 9. Methods of grading that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
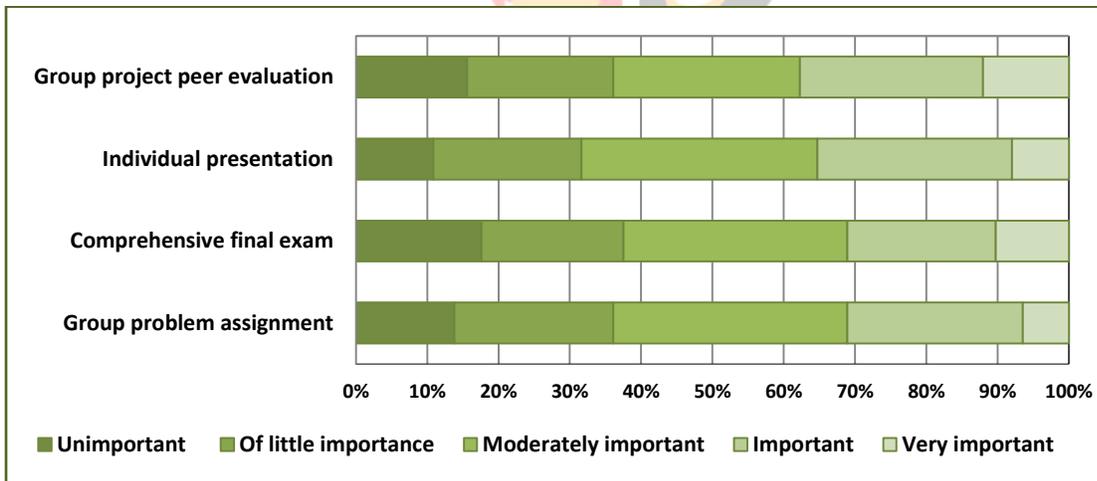

Figure 10. Methods of grading that contribute to student satisfaction: methods rated somewhat equally as LI, MI, HI.
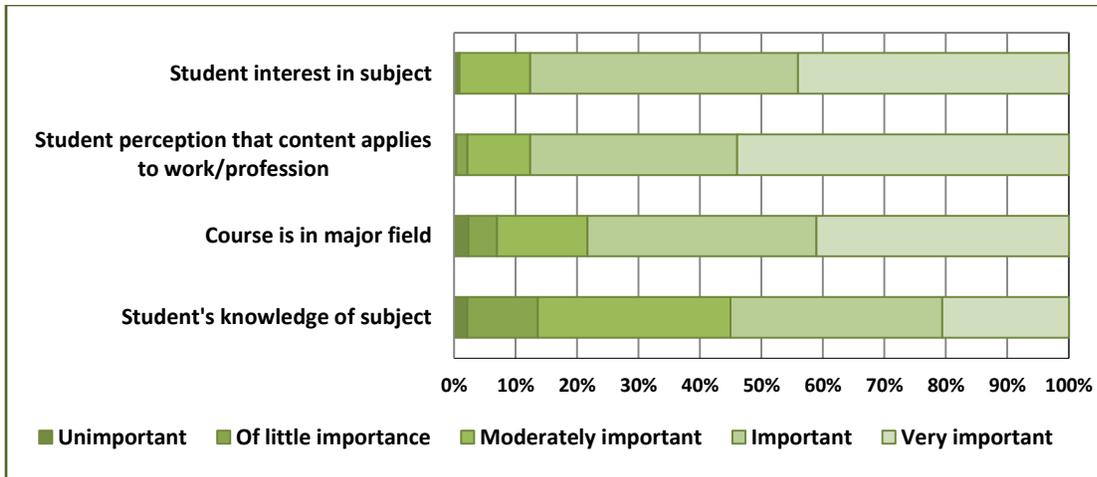
Figure 11. Subject characteristics that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.
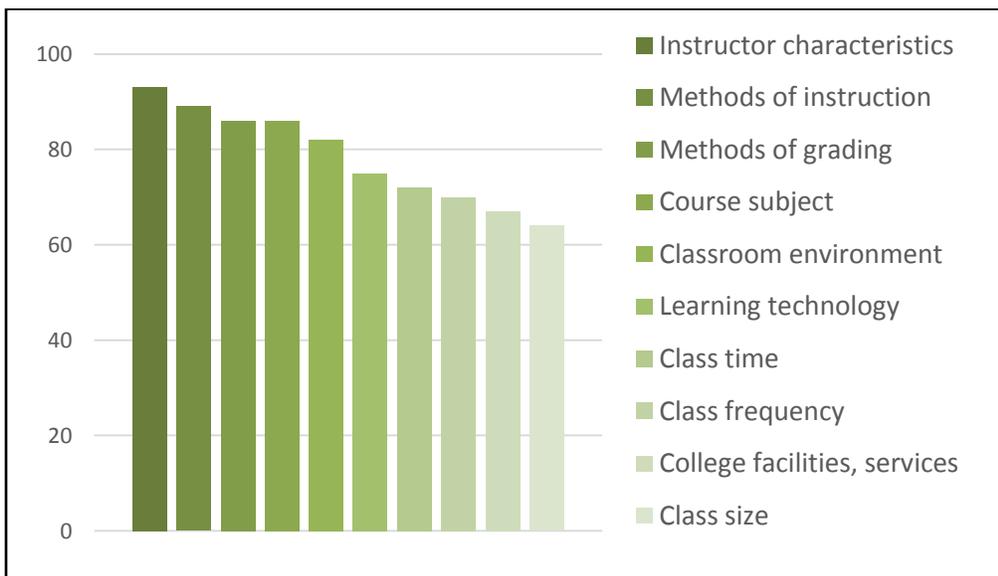

Figure 12. Factors that contribute to student satisfaction with a college course.

APPENDIX C

What size class contributes most to your overall satisfaction with a college course?

   __ Fewer than 12 students
   __ 12 to 20 students
   __ 21 to 35 students
   __ 35 to 50 students
   __ More than 50 students

What time of day for classes contributes most to your overall satisfaction with a college course?

   __ Morning – 8 to 11 am
   __ Afternoon – 1 to 4 pm
   __ Evening – After 5 pm

Which schedule of classes would lead to your overall satisfaction with a college course?

   __ 3X per week, 50 minute class
   __ 2X per week, 75 minute class
   __ 1X per week, 150 minute class

On a scale of UNIMPORTANT to VERY IMPORTANT, how important is each item listed below in determining your overall satisfaction with a college course?

Unimportant	Of little importance	Moderately important	Important	Very Important

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

   A clean, comfortable and uncrowded classroom
   Good visibility to the instructor and course material presentation
   Limited outside interference (interruptions, noise)
   Attentive and participative classmates

METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

   Lecture by teacher
   Lecture-demonstration by teacher
   Class discussion conducted by teacher
   Small group class discussion conducted by students
   Textbook assignments
   Library research on topic or problems
   Individual student projects
   Individual student presentations
   Group projects
   Group presentations
   Individual student self-directed learning (completion of assignments at own pace)

INSTRUCTOR
- Instructor has good working knowledge of the subject
- Instructor engages students in class discussions
- Instructor is accessible and available when needed
- Instructor is interested and passionate about the subject
- Instructor has practical experience of the subject
- Instructor is interested in student learning
- Instructor is helpful
- Instructor is prompt to answer email

COLLEGE FACILITIES AND SERVICES
- Access to parking
- Ease to get to class
- Cost of tuition and fees
- Safety of campus environment
- Services offered (cafeteria, bookstore, etc.)
- Access to support services (tutoring, financial aid, etc.)
- Social opportunities (sororities, fraternities, sports, networking, etc.)
- Career counseling and job placement

LEARNING TECHNOLOGY
- Use of Blackboard and other related technologies for assignments and communication with instructors and other students
- Use of the Internet, videos and other electronic media for classroom presentations and/or assignments
- Use of Microsoft PowerPoint for presentations
- Availability of electronic textbooks

METHODS OF GRADING
- Comprehensive final exam
- Chapter tests
- Quizzes
- Class participation
- Individual student writing assignments
- Individual student problem assignments
- Individual student presentations
- Group writing assignments
- Group problem assignments
- Group presentations
- Evaluations by fellow students based on participation in group project
- Attendance

COURSE SUBJECT
- My overall interest in the subject
- My previous knowledge of the subject
- The course is in my major field of study
- My perception that the course content can be applied to my work or profession

On a scale of UNIMPORTANT to VERY IMPORTANT, how important is each item listed below in determining your overall satisfaction with a college course?

Unimportant	Of little importance	Moderately important	Important	Very Important

Classroom Environment
Class Size
Class Time
Class Frequency
Learning Technology
Methods of Instruction
Methods of Grading
Instructor
Course Subject
College Facilities and
    Services