

THE GREAT DIVIDE: STUDENT VERSUS FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF GROUP DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

The ability to work efficiently and effectively with others in a group is a critical determinant of student success in the workplace. In fact, employers now commonly rank teamwork skills as one of the most important attributes they look for when interviewing graduates. Therefore, instructors should be familiar with the factors that influence group dynamics and outcomes in order to facilitate more effective group experiences. Previous research has explored some of these issues. The goal of this study is to add to the existing knowledge of group dynamics by examining how student views regarding group work compare to those of their instructors. Armed with this information, faculty will be in a better position to understand the group process within their classrooms from a student perspective and to more effectively manage the group experience for their students.

To explore the issue of how students view group work as compared with their instructors, we collected survey data from both faculty and students. We used 31 different measures to assess a range of group dynamic factors. These measures included group cohesion, conflict and conflict resolution, communication, attitudes and trust. Faculty data were collected through an online questionnaire on ELMAR, a marketing newsgroup. One hundred thirty-four instructors returned a completed survey. Student data were gathered from a variety of different marketing courses, including Consumer Behavior, Marketing Research, Sales Force Management and Strategic Marketing Management. Each of these classes included a significant, semester long group project with primary and secondary data collection, data analysis, a substantial written component and an oral presentation. At the end of the semester, students were instructed to consider their group project experience for that specific class in completing the survey. Five hundred thirty three completed student surveys were collected.

Our findings show that there are significant gaps between student opinions and perceptions of their group experiences and the perceptions held by faculty. In fact, all but 3 of the 31 comparisons indicated significant differences between student and instructor perceptions. The 3 non significant differences were related to whether students made new friends in the group experience (mean of 5.2 for students and 5.2 for faculty), if the group achieved harmony by avoiding conflict (mean of 5.1 for students and 4.9 for faculty) and the percentage of groups that experience conflict (26% in the student sample and 29% in the faculty sample). Some of the more substantial differences between faculty versus students perceptions indicated that faculty thought that: (a) groups argued quite a bit more, (b) groups could have worked together better, (c) group members worried about their grades, and (d) group members did the work of other team members.

Even more intriguing than the strong differences in perceptions is the fact that faculty were consistently more pessimistic about the group experience than were the students. Instructors had more positive attitudes than the students in only 2 out of 31 comparisons.

The gap between the perceptions of faculty and those of students is very wide. It appears that instructors are overly pessimistic and, perhaps, should adjust their attitudes toward the student perceived value of group activities. This may lead to more group project activity, and hopefully, more teamwork skills training provided to students to increase the value of these group experiences.