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Cox, Rebecca D. (2009) *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Imagine, for a moment, the students who enroll in a community college program. They have hopes and aspirations for their future. Likely, they envision the college classroom containing tables and chairs arranged in rows, and a learned professor at the front who will deliver a lecture. Rebecca Cox in her book, *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another*, describes these students and uses their voices to describe their hopes, fears and expectations. She also describes the expectations that professors have of their students. College professors often see a gap between the skills the students have, and the skills they believe students ought to have. Additionally, she describes the inherent obstacles to student success that are embedded in college policies and the academic culture.

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The book relies on four studies; a national field study of fifteen community colleges in six states, a study of collaborative efforts for training science and engineering technicians at community colleges and their local four-year colleges, and two studies that focus on instructional dynamics in the community college classroom. Cox conducted the two community college instructional studies herself, and was a member of the teams conducting the larger two studies. The National Field Study focused on concerns such as state-led accountability, developmental education, new post-secondary competitors and web-based education. The Study of Advanced Technological Education Centers focused on the collaborative efforts between two-year and four-year colleges in technology programs. Cox participated in site visits to community colleges. Most of the evidence presented in the book consists of qualitative data comprising descriptions of student experiences, faculty perspectives, and the case studies of two successful professors. The book refers almost exclusively to data from the two small instructional dynamics studies, which gathered data from seven community college classes. The national studies were not referenced specifically although some of the generalized statements may have relied on broader experience gained from the national studies.

The book is divided into eight chapters and three parts. Chapter one is an introduction. Part One contains chapters two, three and four. Part Two contains chapters five and six. Part Three contains chapters seven and eight. Additionally, an appendix is included, outlining the research studies. Part One describes the student perspectives, focusing on anxiety, motivation and expectations. Student anxiety is pervasive. “Regardless of age, ethnicity, academic background, educational goals, or the path to college, students reveal tremendous anxiety about their educational trajectories and the ability to succeed in college.” (p 21) Cox argues that these anxieties stem from failures in their past or current academic situation, fear of the professor, feelings of inadequate preparation, and low self-confidence. One student described this mix of anxiety and fears as “the total fear factor”. (p 21) As a result, students employ various coping mechanisms. They might scale back their goals and change their educational plan to require less school. They might redefine success and failure to learn something from the

failures and refocus on the successes. For instance, they might drop a course in which they are performing poorly and refocus on the courses that are more successful. They might avoid assessments due to a feeling of unpreparedness and inadequacy. Cox poignantly describes this self-deprecating perspective, "...students exhibited very low tolerance for feeling confused or making mistakes, phenomena they could easily attribute to their own inadequacy rather than to the process of learning new skills or information." (p 37)

The students who overcame their fears did so with motivation. They wanted financial stability and a job they would enjoy. They view a college education as the shortest path to that goal. Students who had some employment experience were particularly motivated because they found that their lack of a college education severely limited their career options.

College students expect professors to use the lecture method of curriculum delivery. They expect the professor to "profess". Cox cites many examples where students are confronted with alternate pedagogies such as class discussions, and peer evaluations, and she concludes their frustrations are due to a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of the college course delivery. Cox also describes the pervasive student attitude that the important material is reflected in assessments, and if material is not assessed, it's not important. Cox identifies this attitude as a mismatch between the student's view of which information is important and the professors' view of which information is important. She implies that the mismatch is due to some short-sightedness on the part of the students. She does not consider that the student perspective may be reasonable given that grades are the commodity in a course and weighting reflects importance of course material. The error may be the professors' in not attaching an assessment to all of the important information in a course.

Cox identifies an additional challenge, "...students are not generally equipped with the 'skills' or knowledge to determine what their professors expect or how to meet the expectations. Many community college students have immense difficulty figuring out how to learn effectively in specific situations or why they are having trouble with a

subject.” (p 84) They are unprepared for learning in a college environment.

Part Two describes some classroom dynamics, focusing on pedagogy and the interaction between the professor and student. In this section of the book, Cox provides many examples that illustrate the frustration of students when the professors use pedagogy such as class discussion, presentations or individual analysis of readings. Students view these methods as “not teaching”. The arguments in this section tend to be repetitions from Part One, however Cox extends the arguments with some detailed examples of successful pedagogy employed by two professors, that is interactive and not lecture-based. The two professors provide frequent feedback, and make a point of telling students they have faith in their ability to succeed. Cox concludes there are three ingredients for successful instruction. First, the student must perceive the professor as someone who has expert knowledge and can explain concepts well. Second, the student must perceive the professor as authoritative based on interpersonal relations with the students. Third, the professors must have high standards for the student’s work, and from the student’s view, provide clear instructions. These techniques alleviate the anxiety felt by the students.

Cox described the two successful professors as people who have an air of authority, create a learning environment that is encouraging, provide ample feedback, provide clear assignment instructions and reduce student anxiety. These are compelling case studies and they describe techniques that could be effective in any classroom. However Cox did not provide a clear comparison of the traditional lecture delivery and the alternative delivery offered by the two successful professors. With respect to the lecture pedagogy, Cox states “In my classroom observations, students seemed wholly comfortable as passive recipients of professors’ expert knowledge...” (p 90) This implies there were students whose expectations were met in terms of pedagogy and classroom dynamics. Were they successful? Is there a hybrid model that would align with the students’ expectations of college, and would be more effective than a strict lecture approach? Cox does not address these issues.

Part Three focuses on the mismatched expectations of students and professors as well as the systemic impediments to student success. Cox explains the disconnection between the expectations of the students toward the professors and college education, along with the disconnection between the expectation of the professors toward the preparedness and capabilities of the students. Cox argues that professors believe that students are unable to complete a task when, in fact, they are unprepared. For instance, when asked to write a research paper containing a persuasive argument, students may interpret this as writing their opinion rather than forming an analytical argument. The students have not been taught to write an analytical argument and therefore are not prepared, as opposed to understanding how to write an analytical argument but not being able to do it. Cox argues this is a case of not being prepared academically as opposed to not being capable of doing the work.

Cox describes the age old dilemma faculty face when they have students in their classes who are not prepared to do the work expected of them.

On the one hand, this professor recognizes that students require further writing instruction to succeed in her class. On the other hand, offering the instruction herself calls for added time and energy on a level that is difficult – if not impossible – to sustain. In the absence of an organizational resolution, the default response is often to exclude students who lack preparation. (p. 149)

This is a systemic impediment to student success.

Another example of a systemic obstacle is the lack of standardization of similar tasks across courses. For instance, standards for essay writing vary from one course to another. This situation is frustrating for students. Cox concludes that improving the educational opportunities of the students starts with understanding the preconceptions and expectations of the students toward a college education. Additionally, Cox argues that a paradigm shift of pedagogy is required, moving from “professing” to a more sophisticated relational model where teaching is a practice and the primary task of the

college professor is to understand the relationship of the students to the course content and to facilitate learning. However, Cox clearly states that she is providing a snapshot of some classroom practises and is not providing a full description of dynamics in a classroom over an entire course. With that in mind, it seems like a leap from snapshots inside a classroom, to a recommendation for a paradigm shift in pedagogy.

Cox also concludes that “Uncovering and understanding students’ preconceptions and expectations should take precedence in the process of rethinking learning objectives and the means of accomplishing them” (p 164) If education is a combination of what is taught and how it is taught, then learning objectives constitute “what” and pedagogy is “how”. Cox’s statement implies that “how” should take precedence over “what”. Her evidence certainly suggests that students who overcome their fears can be successful, and that professors who understand the students’ fears and capabilities are more likely to have higher rates of successful students. This does not suggest that addressing the students’ expectations and preconceptions should take precedence over learning outcomes, but it does suggest that it should take precedence in selecting pedagogy. Consideration of student expectations and preconceptions should take precedence in selecting “how”, but not in selecting “what”. Perhaps a more accurate statement might be “uncovering and understanding students’ preconceptions and expectations should take precedence in re-thinking the means of accomplishing learning objectives.”

Finally, Cox recommends a paradigm shift in the college culture to an environment where professors focus on understanding the relationship of the student to the course content and to facilitate learning. Professors should also be supported by the college in building their teaching skills. Although this recommendation makes sense on its own, there is no direct evidence in this book to support it. The case studies of the successful professors are compelling, but a sample of two successful classes in one college does not provide sufficient evidence to support a paradigm shift in college culture.

Overall, Cox effectively describes the fears of college students that stems from their past failures, and feeling of

inadequacy. She describes their motivation to be successful at college in order to attain a better job, and their expectations of a traditional lecture setting. The case studies of the two successful professors illustrate techniques that could be used in any classroom. She contrasts this with the professors who are less in tune with their students and have unrealistic expectations of their preparedness and abilities. The recommendations highlight a need for professors to align their expectations with the skills the students have, rather than the skills they think the students ought to have. Furthermore, colleges should undergo a paradigm shift to support faculty growth in their teaching skills. Although the recommendations may not follow the evidence directly, there is an indication for further study in this area to investigate the techniques used by professors who have higher percentages of student success.

After reading this book, the takeaway for any college professor should be that it is important to be mindful of the students' anxieties and fears. A little encouragement goes a long way. Clearly communicating assessment expectations and directions is another area to be mindful of. For an educational researcher, the takeaway is that there is ample opportunity for more study inside college classrooms to examine the factors of student success, including perception, and expectations on the part of both students and professors.

About the Reviewer

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