

Guidelines for the development of student choice policies regarding dissection in colleges and universities: An ethnographic analysis of faculty and student concerns

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Abstract

Legislation in 15 states relating to animal use in K-12 education offers elementary and secondary students the option to decline participating in dissection. Similar provisions do not exist for college students. Recently, however, some students and faculty in higher education have developed policies offering alternatives to students who object to dissection on ethical grounds. The process of initiating such policies affects students, faculty, and administrators and often proves challenging. Our ethnographic analyses represent faculty and students at six U.S. colleges working toward current and/or proposed formalized student choice policies. Five key factors of concern arose among both faculty members and students: 1) specific academic requirements and learning objectives; 2) administrative responsibilities for staffing, scheduling, and supplies; 3) student access to alternatives and disclosure of animal use; 4) identifying and acquiring effective alternatives; and 5) constructive dialogue among students, faculty, and administration. We present the typical concerns and recommendations of students, faculty, and administrators working for the creation of formalized student choice policies, and offer a template of guidelines for colleges and universities seeking to formalize student choice.

Keywords: student choice policy, dissection, college, university, biology

Introduction

The first formal student choice policy at a United States college or university was enacted in 1994 at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York (HSUS, 2007b). While some colleges and universities have had informal or unwritten student choice policies prior to this, this policy was the first formal policy adopted by a U.S. college for biology courses. Since then, similar formal policies have been adopted at major universities including ivy league and state universities, giving students the right to choose an alternative to dissection (Animalearn, 2007). While some of these policies were efficiently passed and implemented, others involved a lengthy process that was sometimes confusing for the parties involved. During the process of passing a policy, both parties can take actions to streamline the process. In order to help expedite and improve the process, we conducted research with both faculty and students from six colleges and universities with the goal of assembling a template of best practices.

Most of the legislative effort concerning pre-college uses of animals has concerned students being able to decline participating in dissection. At

this level, fifteen states have passed legislation or resolutions requiring that students have options other than dissecting if they choose not to participate. Florida, California, Pennsylvania, New York, Rhode Island, Illinois, Virginia, Maine, and Louisiana have laws upholding a student's right to choose alternatives to dissection without being penalized (Animalearn, 2007a). Resolutions by the state's department of education have been passed in Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Mexico (Hart, Wood, and Hart 2008).

Organizations supporting this legislation offer counseling support for students who find themselves in difficult positions regarding dissection. Websites, consultations, and alternatives to dissection available on loan lend further support of this type to the students (Animalearn, 2007; Humane Society of the United States, 2007a.).

Materials and methods

Individual interviews were held with six students and six faculty members who had been seeking to develop a student choice policy or who had successfully passed a student choice policy at their

college or university. Five interviews were conducted in-person, six were by telephone, and two interactive interviews were via the internet, with a duration averaging 35 minutes (range of 20 -70 minutes). There were eleven individual interviews conducted and one group interview. A series of open-ended questions focused on the interviewee's experiences in developing a new policy and concerns that arose during the process. Detailed written notes were made during each interview. Each interviewee had experience in the establishment, implementation, and/or utilization of student choice at his or her university. The six United States colleges and universities were selected to be diverse in demographics, curriculum, geography, and educational focus. Colleges and universities represented were: Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania); Hofstra University (New York); Sarah Lawrence College (New York); University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana (Illinois); Virginia Commonwealth University (Virginia); and Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Massachusetts).

For the ethnographic analysis, concerns mentioned in each interview were summarized and tabulated separately for faculty members and students.

Results

Both faculty members and students expressed five key areas of concern:

1. Specific academic requirements and learning objectives

Both students and faculty indicated that students were expected to review other universities' existing student choice policies to serve as frames of reference, assessing effects on existing academic course requirements. Particularly important to faculty and administration were whether top ranked universities had student choice policies, which served to support the case for student choice and to refute faculty's expressed fears that student choice policies were not pedagogically sound.

A feature that most students desired was that the policy pertains to courses required for the completion of degrees, so that students could graduate without harming an animal in class. Often, some, but not all, elective courses are covered by student choice policies regarding animal use, limiting selection of courses for students with alternatives.

Faculty members are concerned with the implications of a student choice policy on academic freedom to use animals in instruction, and how it will affect their course planning. Some faculty members noted that some biology faculty believe there is an educational benefit derived from dissection. In many cases, there was faculty support for student choice, but also support for the value of dissection, especially for future surgeons, science educators, and medical professionals. Some question the value of dissection for undergraduates. Faculty are also concerned for the quality of alternatives and whether they will be

pedagogically efficient. In order to avoid conflict, faculty sometimes eliminated animal use from specific classes.

Both faculty and students stated that there was an ambiguous requirement for an 'equivalent' experience with alternatives that was not well defined. For example, learning objectives from classes using animals were sometimes applied to classes with alternative learning objectives and experiences.

2. Administrative responsibilities for staffing, scheduling, and supplies

In terms of staffing, faculty expressed concern about the impact of a student choice policy on staffing and course scheduling. Questions such as, "Can we do this?" "Do we have enough faculty and resources to implement alternatives?" were common. One solution is that a separate 'alternatives' lab course be required for students choosing alternatives, perhaps in alternating semesters from a conventional course.

Logistical challenges include implementation of the policy, and both faculty and students indicated the importance of having a supportive faculty member involved in the follow-up once a policy is passed to ensure timely implementation. Ensuring visibility through discussions with senior administration officials to promote student choice awareness was stated to be important.

Most policies are adopted on a university-wide basis, with decisions made by an overriding body of students, faculty, and administrators. In some cases, however, the policy is specific to departments, such as biology and psychology, so that faculty can retain their departmental autonomy.

3. Student access to alternatives and disclosure of animal use

Some of the colleges and universities in this study initially worked with an informal student choice policy prior to implementing a formal student choice policy. In most cases, this informal policy was unwritten, leading to uneven implementation. As a result, some students were allowed to use alternatives and others were not. This disparity in access to alternatives was a rationale for them seeking a formal student choice policy.

One important aspect of a student choice policy was providing advance disclosure in courses requiring animal use. Students would like the opportunity to either discuss options for alternatives or avoid the class, perhaps by disclosure on the syllabus. Students indicated the importance of requiring courses to indicate on the syllabus if animal use is required in the course. Students used this information to decide whether to discuss alternatives or avoid the class. Faculty seemed to agree that disclosure at the beginning of the course should mitigate potential problems. At one university, a student asked for several weeks notice if animals were to be used in a course, but the abbreviated duration of the term led

faculty to object to this request. At this university, faculty decided to disclose the use of animals on the syllabus and only provide for alternatives in specific course sections.

4. Identifying and acquiring effective alternatives

Some faculty anticipated that few students would utilize a student choice policy, thus resulting on a minimal effect on teaching.

Questions arose regarding the efficacy of available alternatives. In some cases faculty had not assessed any available alternatives, which negatively impacted students. Some students disliked the alternatives selected for courses. Some felt that undue effort was required when using the selected alternatives, or that there was still some pressure to participate in dissection. Some faculty members indicated that even with the policy in place, they would not force, but would still persuade students to dissect animals.

The responsibility for identifying, selecting, and procuring effective and suitable alternatives differs at each university. Some of the colleges and universities have on hand as part of their laboratory supplies, or will obtain, approved alternatives for students. Students can also facilitate this process by recommending options for alternatives. It seemed to work for students' benefit to be prepared with information when seeking an alternative. Education departments from animal protection organizations helped some students, assisting them in presenting appropriate alternatives to their course instructors. Faculty often were involved in selection of alternatives for their courses.

5. Constructive dialogue among students, faculty, and administration

Both faculty and students indicated the importance of finding a sympathetic faculty member for involvement in the creation, negotiation, implementation, and follow-up of student choice. While it may lend even additional credibility if this faculty member has a background in the life sciences, or is tenured, any respected faculty member who knows faculty in affected departments and relevant administrative personnel could help the initiative and expedite the process. Coordination with senior administrators ensures long-term success.

Testimony from respected professionals in related fields to support the use of alternatives could help provide credibility to the student choice efforts. At one university, students brought in a testimony from a toxicologist who conducts animal research to help support their case for student choice to the university.

Many faculty members indicated the importance of viewing a student choice policy as a defined outcome rather than a moving target. If it seems like a student choice policy is only the first step in an endless process, faculty may ask, "What can students ask for now---that all animal research cease?" It can seem to be a slippery slope. Student advocates are inclined to

want more, asking, "What else might succeed in the future?"

Some faculty indicated that student-led initiatives are a source of pride. At one campus, students involved in a social change project focused on a student choice policy, establishing on-campus hearings about animal use and meeting with biology faculty, lending credibility to efforts. At another university, the student choice policy was part of a capstone project. Since faculty valued involvement in such a project, it lent credibility to the student choice effort.

Students indicated that animal advocates were often viewed as naïve, uninformed, and unreasonable. Many indicated the value of providing faculty and administration with well-researched, balanced, and accurate presentations focussed on educational efficacy, as opposed to demonstrations focussed on an animal rights agenda. Both students and faculty indicated the importance of using professional manners, and providing quality information to key decision makers that counteracts a perception of naiveté. In a chain reaction process, one faculty advocate promotes others to listen. A hostile atmosphere results in polarization and defensiveness.

Students saw value in approaching their student government. While the student government typically had limited power to affect change, they could serve as helpful allies to support a policy, especially in situations where a referendum election for student choice could send a message to the university.

Discussion: Recommended best practices for success in student choice efforts

The results from our analysis are intended to help students and faculty in their efforts to establish student choice policies at their colleges and universities. Through the discussions with individuals that have gone through the process, we present a five-point template for best practices that can guide in current and future endeavours at other colleges and universities.

1. Address current academic requirements and curricular issues

a. Supporting Documentation

Those proposing and considering a student choice policy at their college or university should adequately prepare by reviewing existing student choice policies at other universities. Particularly important to many faculty and administration is supporting documentation from top-tier universities. Addressing issues of pedagogy is critical to a policy's success. Faculty and administration consider this relevant information when considering student choice policies.

b. Course Structure

Once the policy is adopted, many universities comprehensively allow students to utilize alternatives in all courses where there is animal use, but some universities develop a more limited policy. Due

to logistical constraints, some universities offer 'alternatives-only' courses in specific semesters. These universities expect students to structure their schedule by selecting the courses that only use alternatives, instead of expecting faculty to provide both options in every course.

c. Requirements

Policies have the most chance of success when adequate preparation is taken to understand and uncover requirements from accreditation bodies that may affect the departments covered by the policy. Some scientific fields have specific course requirements for students or accreditation, and if this could affect the use of alternatives, those proposing the policy need to be cognizant in order to further the policy's success.

2. Define the administrative scope of the policy, and which units will be affected by the policy.

a. Affected Units

It is important to decide whether the entire university, specific departments, or certain courses will be affected by the policy. While many universities pass a university-wide policy, in other cases the policy only applies to specific courses including some electives, courses for science majors, courses for science non-majors, etc.

b. Implementation

Who will have ultimate responsibility for implementing the policy? If a university-wide governing body passes the policy, the responsibility will differ considerably from a policy that is overseen by a specific department. Different universities choose to handle this in different ways. In some, departments retain autonomy regarding the use of alternatives, while most seem to put the locus of control at a campus level.

3. Clarify students' options for choice and clearly designate classes with animal use.

It is important to denote whether students who plan to pursue a life science or similar degree will be able to use alternatives, or if the policy will only apply to non-majors. Students should be aware of their options for choosing an alternative, whether alternatives are provided, and whether specific alternatives are proscribed or if students are expected to access their own alternatives. Also, once passed, the policy should be publicized so that people are made aware of their opportunities to select an alternative. Notations should be made which indicate the procedures involved for students who select an alternative, for example, whether it occurs at the beginning of a course as listed on the syllabus, so they have adequate time to select an alternative or choose another course. The procedure for students designating their choice should become part of the policy.

4. Assign responsibility and the process involved to identify and acquire effective alternatives for courses where needed.

Designation should be made as to the process for selecting, identifying, and acquiring alternatives. Even if the faculty course leader usually organizes all laboratory materials, there may be some administrative aspects to implementing alternatives. A course approval process may require updating to indicate the use of alternatives. Animal use protocols may also need to be rewritten to reflect a use of alternatives. If the process is more centralized, these activities may be handled by the science department head. In still other cases, it may be the responsibility of the student taking the course to acquire suitable alternatives. If this is clearly denoted, it can prevent confusion regarding the selection process for the appropriate alternatives. Some colleges and universities designate a select set of alternatives as approved for specific courses, while others allow some leeway in the student selecting the alternatives.

5. Identify a supportive faculty member to spearhead policy efforts for initiation, implementation, and follow-up, also fostering a collegial environment.

a. Faculty member could be a respected member from any discipline, and should be involved in the entire process to lend support and credibility.

According to students and faculty interviewed for this study, those with an interest in establishing a student choice policy at their college or university could experience a greater likelihood of success if the five-point template is followed. Hopefully, through the experiences of students and faculty at colleges and universities who have successfully established student choice policies, other colleges and universities initiating a student choice policy can experience a smoother process.

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