

Center for Teaching Excellence

This is the fifth of a series of newsletters encouraging faculty enrichment and excellence in teaching by announcing opportunities, sharing ideas, and promoting collaboration.

Congratulations to Steve Davis, recipient of the Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching! He has been recognized by Baylor University as one of the world's greatest teachers. His life and work definitely exemplify teaching excellence!

Let me encourage you to attend his lecture entitled "Undergraduate Research, Celebrating the Spice of Science," Monday, February 11, at 7:30 p.m. in Smothers Theater.



He is indeed a Distinguished Professor of Biology!

If you are interested in attending this conference, please let me know; I will provide funding for you!

The Teaching Professor Conference, May 16-18, 2008, in Kissimmee, Florida: Go to <http://www.magnapubs.com>. Click on Conferences at the top of the page and then on The Teaching Professor. At this website you may also sign up for a free newsletter about teaching .

Please feel free to share your comments on this article!

Faculty
A free electronic newsletter
for those involved with
teaching in Higher Education **Focus**

Student Attention Spans

January 2008

Have you heard that advice about chunking content in 10- to 15-minute blocks because that's about as long as students can attend to material in class? It's a widely-touted statistic and given the behaviors indicative of inattentiveness observed in class, most faculty haven't questioned it. But Karen Wilson and James H. Korn did. They got to wondering how researchers made that determination. "What was the dependent measure, and how did researchers measure attention during a lecture without influencing the lecture itself as well as students' attention?" (p. 85)

They began by tracking down the sources, starting with some well-known books that include this attention span statistic. What they found was quite surprising: "It turns out that the research concerned attention only indirectly or not at all and that several frequently-cited sources were not empirical studies, but secondary sources or personal observations." (p. 87)

For example, some of the research cited as documenting the statistic looked at how many notes students took throughout a lecture—assuming that fewer notes meant lower levels of attentiveness. But the most recent study in this group found that although the amount of notes did decline across the period, student retention of the material did not.

A number of authors report on the decline in attention based on observation—in some cases, their own, and in others, that of independent judges. In the best of these studies, observers noted a low level of attentiveness at the beginning of the lecture and again sometime between 10 and 18 minutes into the lecture. However, this study suffers from several significant methodological flaws.

Finally, some researchers looked at retention of the material, assuming that if retention is low, students are not paying attention. This research does document that students do not retain a lot of lecture material, between 40 percent and 46 percent in one study. They were tested on content recall immediately after listening to and taking notes on a lecture. But, surprisingly, retention of content was pretty much stable across lecture periods of different lengths.

None of this says that students listen well in class. For most of us, that would be a hard sell. But it does challenge a widely touted statistic. Wilson and Korn don't believe that their inquiry excuses faculty from developing ways to keep students attentive and focused on course content. They also believe that individual differences are relevant when considering how well students are listening. And they think that what students have in their notes is more important than how many of them they are taking.

Reference: Wilson, K. and Korn, J. H. (2007). "Attention during lectures: Beyond ten minutes." *Teaching of Psychology*, 34 (2), 85–89.

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Training sessions for the use of TurnItIn, the new Blackboard feature, are being scheduled!

The Spring Faculty Colloquium which is sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence, the University Libraries, and the Seaver Faculty Association will be in Payson Library at 4:00 p.m. on February 28, March 27, and April 17.