

# A Survey of Agriculture Student Attitudes toward the Dress of Their Classroom Instructors<sup>1</sup>

Tracy A.O. Dougher<sup>2</sup> and Bob Gough<sup>3</sup>  
Department of Plant Sciences and Plant Pathology  
Montana State University  
Bozeman, MT 59717



## Abstract

College of Agriculture majors at Montana State University were surveyed in 1998 and 2002 on their attitudes toward faculty dress in the classroom. Students expressed an increased level of comfort with formal attire in the classroom, but also expressed that faculty attire did not influence their perception of faculty competence and professionalism. Students consistently ranked method of presentation first and instructor attire last among five instructor attributes.

## Introduction

“Dressing for success” is a model of the business world that has been applied to academia for years (Gorham et al., 1999). Academics have adopted casual dress styles despite studies that conclude that attire affects the perceived level of competency (Roach, 1997). However, other recent studies suggest that formal professional dress does not equate to higher ratings of perceived competency in the classroom (Morris et al., 1996; Gorham et al., 1999). All previous studies surveyed or tested students across many majors and colleges. Because of the 'hands-on' nature of many College of Agriculture (COA) courses, formal professional attire is not always feasible. The informality of faculty attire has carried over into the lecture setting. In either field or lecture setting, informal faculty attire may detrimentally affect students' perception of COA professionalism. The purpose of this study was to determine if COA faculty attire affected students' perception of instructor competency.

## Methods

Students selected for this study were all majors in the COA at Montana State University (MSU) and enrolled in one of the following departments: Agricultural Economics & Economics, Animal & Range Sciences, Entomology, Plant Sciences & Plant Pathology, Land Resources & Environmental Sciences, Veterinary Molecular Biology, and programs in Ag Education/Ag Operations Technology and Pre-Vet Medicine. Data were collected using a survey that requested student's age, sex, major, home background (rural farm, rural non-farm, suburban, urban), year in college, attire of their instructors, preference of dress both for themselves and the faculty, level of comfort in formal attire, the appropriateness of their instructors'

dress, preference for dress codes for instructors and students, and ranking of importance of course qualities including instructor attire. Tabular results are presented in the format and terminology used on the survey.

Using the COA listserv, students were surveyed by e-mail in mid-November of 1998 and 2002 to exclude a possible 'first-impression' effect more likely earlier in the semester (Gorham et al., 1999). Students were given two weeks to return the survey either by e-mail or hard copy. By surveying students twice, four years apart we obtained results from two different groups, to observe if any changes in attitude occurred over time that could be linked to societal rather than maturity issues. In 1998, 559 students were surveyed while in 2002, 697 students were surveyed. Approximately 50 e-mails failed in each year. These were not counted in the calculation of total respondents. Response data were analyzed using SAS GLM (SAS Institute, Cary, NC) to correlate student perceptions across main effects of survey year, age, sex, home background, and year in college. Where GLM effects were significant, mean separation was determined by the Student-Neuman-Kuels (SNK) test.

## Results and Discussion

### Across Survey Years

In 1998, 74 (14%) of the students returned the survey; in 2002, 76 (12%) students returned the survey. A majority of the student respondents were traditional, college-age females (Table 1). Respondents were fairly evenly distributed among years in college, although in 2002 a larger portion were seniors. All majors in the COA were represented (data not shown). In 1998 the most responsive students were majors in livestock management, animal sciences, and ag business, and in 2002 the most responsive students were majors in animal sciences, landscape design, and ag education. The compositional change in majors of the students responding to the survey reflects the change in composition of the MSU COA during the 1998-2002 time span. Age of respondents was not substantially different from 1998 to 2002 (Table 1). In both years, most respondents were from a rural farm background, but the percentage of students with rural farm background dropped by a third in 2002 with rural non-farm, suburban, and urban all increasing (Table 1). In both years, respondents had an average of two

<sup>1</sup>The authors gratefully acknowledge the students who took the time to participate in this survey.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of Horticulture, PO Box 173140

<sup>3</sup>Interim Associate Dean for Academic Programs, College of Agriculture, PO Box 173140

**Table 1. The percentage by sex, age, class status, and background of student respondents for each year of the survey.**

		1998	2002
SEX	female	76	71
	male	24	29
AGE	17-20	42	33
	21-25	51	50
	26-30	5	9
	31-35	0	3
	over 35	1	5
CLASS STATUS	freshman	22	16
	sophomore	28	20
	junior	23	22
	senior	27	42
BACKGROUND	rural farm	64	41
	rural non-farm	20	29
	suburban	11	19
	urban	5	11

instructors wore jeans in 2002 than in 1998.

The majority of students in both years tended to wear casual shirt with jeans for class, but in 2002 double the percent of students were wearing casual outfits to class and trending away from jeans (Table 2). Students were more comfortable wearing formal attire in 2002 than in 1998 (Table 3). Students also felt more comfortable in 2002 than in 1998 when the instructor wore more formal attire.

The respondents in both years generally disagreed with the statement that the way a professor dresses influences their opinion of the class (Table 3). However, 15% of students in 1998 and 22% of students in 2002 did agree with the statement that a professor's dress did influence their opinion of the class. Student respondents from 1998 and 2002 were neutral to more comfortable, respectively, with professors dressing formally, but also disagreed that 'dressing down' reduced the professionalism of instructors (Table 3).

While a majority of students felt there should be no dress code for professors, there was an increase from 10% in 1998 to 22% in 2002 in students agreeing there should be a dress code for instructors (Table 4). Furthermore, only 1% of students in 1998 thought there should be a dress code for students, but in 2002 the number increased to 7%. These responses emphasize the students increased comfort level with more formal dress.

While 20% of the students suggested that instructors should dress however they want ("other" category), a third of the students preferred instructors dress in a casual outfit (Table 5). Another 20% preferred casual shirt with jeans and only 8% preferred more formal attire. In 2002,

**Table 2. Responses to survey questions addressing students' perception of instructor attire and students' own attire preference.**

		1998	2002
Percent of instructors dressing in this type of attire	Suit & tie, skirt/dress & blazer	4	12
	Tie & casual slacks, skirt & blouse, dress	29	29
	Casual outfit	18	30
	Tie with jeans, blazer with jeans	20	12
	Casual shirt with jeans	29	17
	Other	0	1
Percent of students' preferred attire for class	Suit & tie, skirt/dress & blazer	0	0
	Tie & casual slacks, skirt & blouse, dress	3	4
	Casual outfit	16	34
	Tie with jeans, blazer with jeans	0	0
	Casual shirt with jeans	77	62
	Other	5	0

**Table 3. Responses to survey questions addressing students' attitudes toward faculty dress. Letters indicate significant differences at  $\alpha=0.05$  in a Student-Neuman-Kuels test.**

	1998	2002
Students' level of comfort wearing formal attire (1 most comfortable, 5 least comfortable)	3.6a	3.0b
Students' level of comfort when faculty wear formal attire (1 most comfortable, 5 least comfortable)	3.0a	2.7a
The way a professor dresses influences a student's opinion of the class. (1 strongly agree, 5 strongly disagree)	3.8a	3.7a
"Dressing down" reduces the professionalism of professors. (1 strongly agree, 5 strongly disagree)	3.7a	3.9a

**Table 4. Responses to survey questions addressing students' preferences for an instructor and student dress codes.**

		1998	2002
Percentage responses to a dress code for professors.	YES	10	22
	NO	90	78
Percentage responses to a dress code for students	YES	1	7
	NO	99	93

instructors from the COA.

In 1998, instructors tended to dress in extremes with 29% wearing ties & casual slacks and 29% wearing casual shirt with jeans (Table 2). Interestingly, in 2002, respondents perceived that their instructors wore more formal attire with 59% wearing tie & casual slacks or a casual outfit. Fewer

though, there was an increasing trend toward a preference for more formal dress with 20% preferring either "suit and tie, dress or skirt with blazer" or "ties and casual slacks, dress".

When students ranked importance of instructor attire among five other instructor criteria (professionalism, method of presentation, method of grading,

**Table 5. Responses to survey questions addressing students' preferences for instructor attire and ranking of attire importance.**

		1998	2002
Percent of students' preference for instructor attire	Suit & tie, skirt/dress & blazer	0	2
	Tie & casual slacks, skirt & blouse, dress	8	18
	Casual outfit	37	33
	Tie with jeans, blazer with jeans	15	12
	Casual shirt with jeans	20	20
	Other (however they want)	20	14
Average importance ranking of instructor attributes (1 most important, 6 least important)	Instructor's attire	5.85	5.62
	Instructor's overall professionalism	2.93	3.11
	Instructor's method of presentation	1.38	1.57
	Instructor's method of grading	3.38	3.28
	Instructor's availability	3.14	3.11
	Class requirements	3.94	4.00

male counterparts, but there was no significant difference between sexes in how they felt in formal attire, attitudes toward instructor dress, or attitudes toward dress codes. Similarly, there were no significant differences in attitude toward instructor attire either across age or across year in college.

**Across Backgrounds**

Urban students felt more comfortable wearing formal attire and were more comfortable with their instructors dressing formally (Figure 1). This may explain why the shift toward MSU COA students increasingly coming from more urban backgrounds between 1998 to 2002 (Table 1) mimics the increased level of comfort with formal attire.

**Summary**

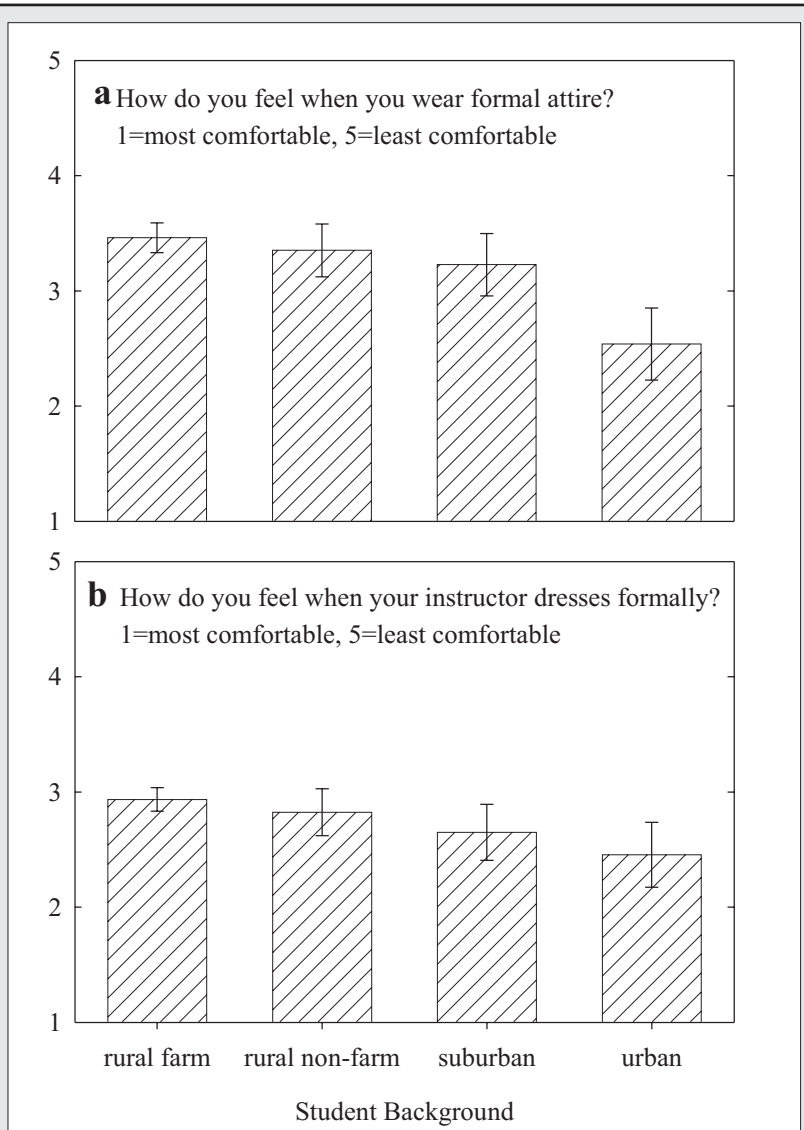
Students in the MSU COA are comfortable with formal attire in the classroom but are not influenced by the attire formality of the instructor. Instructors should not feel compelled to dress formally, which is particularly useful in many COA classes that are held in the field, greenhouse, or laboratory. Most importantly, even though MSU COA students are now more comfortable with formal dress, both in themselves and in their instructors, instructor attire is least important to the students when compared to five other class criteria.

**Literature Cited**

Gorham, J., S.H. Cohen, and T.L. Morris. 1999. Fashion in the classroom III: Effects of instructor attire and immediacy in natural classroom interactions. *Communication Quarterly* 47(3):281-299.

Morris, T.L., J. Gorham, S.H. Cohen, and D. Huffman. 1996. Fashion in the classroom: Effects of attire on student perceptions of instructors in college classes. *Communication Education* 45(2):135-149.

Roach, K.D. 1997. Effects of graduate teaching assistant attire on student learning, misbehaviors, and ratings of instruction. *Communication Quarterly* 45(3):125-42.



**Figure 1. Student level of comfort with formal attire when worn a) by themselves and b) by their instructor across students background. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.**

availability, and course requirements), they consistently ranked method of presentation first and instructor attire last in both 1998 and 2002 (Table 5).

**Across Sexes, Ages, and Year in College**

Females dressed more formally for class than their