

# Are students just computer data numbers

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Is it true that professors are too preoccupied with research to have time for their students? Or aren't the students interested in getting to know their professors? Faye Musil, senior in journalism, devoted several weeks to an investigation of these and similar questions. Her story was written for the School of Journalism depth reporting class.

by Faye Musil

Are students really just numbers on computer data sheets? Or is it all just the fantasy of a few students?

The following quotes drawn from student questionnaires and faculty interviews illustrate the controversy as it affects the University. The following "conversation" didn't really happen — but the words are those of professors and students, put together to make a conversation.

**STUDENT:** One of my professors is never in his office. I tried many times during the day.

**PROFESSOR:** I manage one office hour a day, because I'm willing to work two nights a week.

**STUDENT:** Classes are just too big in most cases. A teacher can't know 300 students.

**PROFESSOR:** A lot of students don't try much. They go by a teacher's office a couple of times and if he's busy they gripe.

**STUDENT:** Instructors are too egotistical and too interested in research. They have no time at all for students.

**PROFESSOR:** If a student wants to talk, there are no obstructions.

**STUDENT:** My adviser seems not unwilling but unenthusiastic about talking to anyone.

**PROFESSOR:** Students don't understand sometimes that teachers are human.

"Teachers are human," said Dr. Max Poole, associate professor of elementary education and educational administration. And both teachers and students all over NU's two campuses at Lincoln seemed to agree — with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

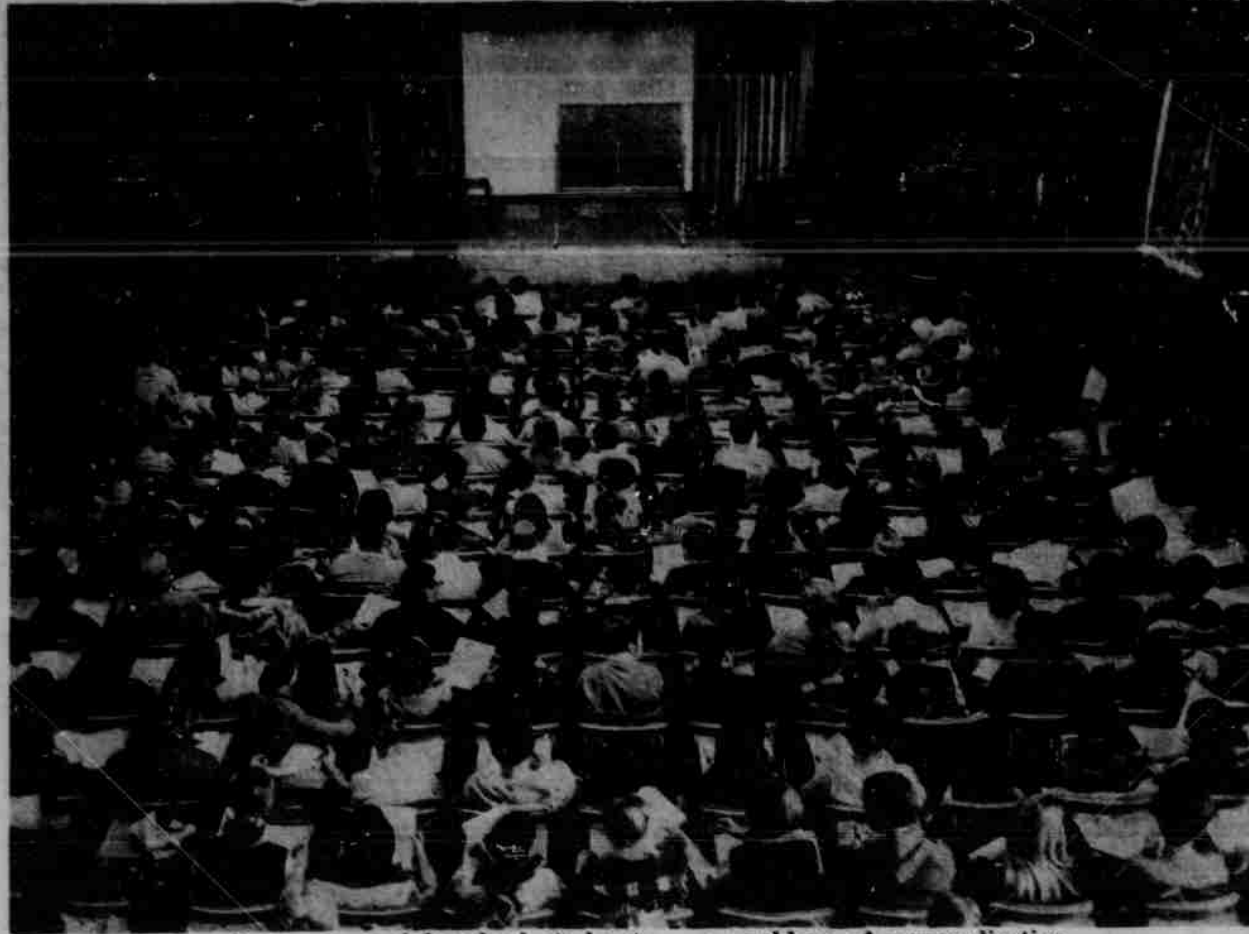
Teachers are shy and students are shy, according to H. W. Manter, curator of parasitology for the University Museum. An NU teacher for 40 years before retirement, Manter said that shyness is one of the greatest reasons why students and professors don't see more of each other.

**HE SAID THAT** students are afraid of taking a teacher's time. Teachers, on the other hand, who would be delighted to have students show an interest, think that the students are uninterested and decline to pressure them. There never has been as much contact as there should have been, he said.

Now, Manter added, the problem has been multiplied by the numbers of students at NU.

Numbers, numbers, numbers.

**MAYBE STUDENTS** who come to the university make a psychological adjustment to its size before they even arrive, theorized Dr. Robert F. Sittig, assistant professor of political science.



one professor, several hundred students... a problem of personalization.

For those who aren't prepared for large schools, there are always private colleges, he went on.

"Here I have to hedge, though," he said. "Small colleges cost money."

Out of 174 students answering a questionnaire, 72 listed cost as one of their reasons for attending NU.

And are those students satisfied with the relationships they have with their professors?

**OF THE 72** students, 47 per cent reported satisfaction and 42 per cent dissatisfaction. The remaining 11 per cent were unable to decide, mostly because they hadn't attended NU long enough to form any impressions.

These results are similar to the over-all results of a student questionnaire from which they were taken. Of 181 student respondents, 46 per cent said they were satisfied and 39 per cent said that they were dissatisfied with student-professor relationships.

What are the causes for such apparent student unhappiness?

Numbers, numbers, numbers. Large numbers of students lead to large classes. Said one freshman student, "Classes are just too big in most cases. A teacher can't know 300 students."

**IF A PROFESSOR** were to talk with 300 students for only 10 minutes each, he would spend 50 hours in conversation. But, said Dr. Carroll R. McKibbin, assistant professor of political science, a natural conversation can't be limited to just 10 minutes. Suppose the professor talks to each student for 30 minutes. That adds up to 150 hours, almost four weeks. But don't

forget that while the professor is talking to these students, he still must prepare and deliver lectures. He must continue his research and attend faculty, departmental and college meetings.

The results? As a student put it, "Professors have too many students, not enough time, and are often overworked to the point where communication fails."

**ANOTHER STUDENT** emphasized this lack of communication: "The professor in large lecture courses doesn't understand the student and vice versa... Students are either required to attend class or they're told 'it's up to you'. Both seem indifferent ways to handle the situation. Both are the result of an impersonal relationship."

Professors agree that large classes result in a lack of communication. McKibbin said that in large classes, size, as a practical matter, must determine format. Discussion, he added, is almost impossible in a class of 150 students. And it's the discussion that tells a professor what things his students are having difficulty understanding, he said.

**DR. IVAN VOLGYES**, associate professor of political science, disagreed. He said that he establishes rapport with his classes by comparing government situations to human experiences. For example, he has compared Soviet foreign relations to courting. The Soviet Union, he has said, is like a woman — trying to be coy while attempting to get a marriage proposal.

Volgyes said he couldn't care less

their personalities, he said.

McKibbin, too, saw some good in large classes. Small classes, he said, by giving the individual more attention from both professor and other students, may be embarrassing to a poor student who needs a large class to hide in until he can catch up.

But in pharmacy, adjustments do not need to be made for numbers, according to Dr. Patrick Wells, associate professor of pharmacology. The ratio of students to faculty members is not so large as in other departments, he said, and juniors and seniors spend most of their class time in the pharmacy building. In this way, he added, professors get to know their students on a personal basis. The students drop by to talk about anything from football to serious course problems.

Dr. John R. Davis, dean of the College of Architecture and Engineering, said that there are mostly majors taking courses in the college. There are a few large freshman classes, but these are broken down during lab sessions, he added.

**DR. WILLIAM L. COLVILLE**, professor in agronomy, said that, to break down large classes, the department has instituted "audio-tutorial" labs. The students come into the laboratory and go through prepared assignments. If they have any difficulty with their work, an assistant is on duty in the room 16 hours a day.

Of large classes Colville commented, "If you're taking a balance of large and small classes, on the average you're comfortable."

No matter what the size of classes, Manter said, "students are like insurance agents. When they stop coming, you know you're getting old."

Numbers, numbers, numbers.

**TO COMBAT** the problems of large numbers, the English Department has set a limit of 30 in freshman classes. To do this, the department hires graduate assistants to teach.

One graduate assistant, Lynn Nelson, said that smaller classes make a more personal atmosphere possible.

He said personal contact and discussion classes stimulate more student responsiveness. He said he is pleased with class participation.

"Education," he argues, "is not osmosis, absorbing the 'Word from On High' in order to spout it back, but a getting involved actively."

**BEING A STUDENT** and teacher at the same time does create some conflict of interest, Nelson admitted. It's a problem of loyalties, he explained. "Which is more important, your studies or your students'?"

Numbers, numbers, numbers.

Another effect of numbers, according to Eric H. Carlson, political science instructor, is that any student-professor relationship outside class must be student-initiated. This is good, Carlson said, because the students get whatever they want in the way of student-professor intimacy.

Of course, this is not entirely without drawbacks, he added. Students are taught throughout high

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