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Passion or Obligation?
Assessing Student Outcomes Achieved by Mandatory Community Service Participation

David S. Neely

Student affairs administrators and faculty alike are making great efforts to encourage college students to engage in community service. However, questions remain regarding the effects of requiring community service as an expectation for maintaining membership in an honors or scholarship organization. Eighty-seven undergraduate honors students at a private research university were surveyed to collect quantitative data related to their participation in community service projects which were completed to meet a membership requirement. The study illustrates the benefits and detriments of requiring community service as a condition for membership in an honors organization.

Many student clubs, honors societies, and Greek letter organizations on today's college campuses require community service participation as a criterion for membership. While higher education research literature provides substantial information regarding student motivations for participation in service-learning and community service (Jones & Hill, 2003), little research has focused on the specific outcomes of participation when service is completed to meet a requirement. To initiate a conversation regarding the outcomes of required community service, the researcher surveyed 87 undergraduate honors students at a private urban research university. The study has provided quantitative data to inform the practice of student affairs professionals, illustrating the benefits and detriments of requiring community service as a condition for membership in an honors organization.

History of Community Service Research

Astin and Sax (1998) conducted the first large-scale, empirical research regarding college students and community service participation in 1998. They collected data from 3,450 undergraduate students from 42 institutions to examine the
impact of community service participation on student development. They reported substantial increases in three areas related to student outcomes: civic responsibility, academic involvement, and life skills. In the conclusion of their article, Astin and Sax stated, “The pattern of findings is striking; every one of the 35 outcome measures was favorably influenced by engagement in some form of service work” (p. 292).

A vast number of studies conducted in the 1990s continued to describe the positive outcomes of student involvement in community service. Rhodes (1999) introduced the concept of the “caring self” as one substantial positive outcome of service involvement. Rhodes wrote:

If we are to promote democratic citizenship in these challenging times, then we must foster in our citizens a commitment to caring. Higher education has a major part to play in this process, and involving students in community service may be one vehicle for meeting this challenge. (p. 283)

In a review of Rhodes’ book Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self, Stage (1999) wrote, “One admirable aspect of Rhodes’ work is that he asks the hard question up front. Whose purposes does community service meet?” (p. 205). Recent studies have continued to ask such hard questions, critically examining the goals of service-related projects, courses, and requirements.

Student Motivations for Community Service Participation

Jones and Hill (2003) conducted an in-depth study on high school and college student motivations for participation in community service. In their discussion of required service, Jones and Hill observed that “required service quickly took on a negative connotation” (p. 524). They further explained that participants’ comments on required service ran along two paths. The first was, if community service is required, it is not community service. And the second was, because service was required, they only thought about meeting the requirement and not why they were performing service (p. 524).

Jones and Hill (2003) specifically addressed community service requirements in high school and how the locus of motivation, either external or internal, affected students’ continued participation after graduation and into their college careers. Students who participated in community service in high school and continued to do so in college cited internal influences, including giving back to others and feeling empathy towards those they serve. Students who ceased participating in community service after high school stated that they had only participated in high school primarily as a means to bolster their college application and competitive scholarship credentials. After completing the college application process, the students no longer saw any personal benefits for continuing their service. Jones and Hill found that “policies requiring service, crafted with the best of intentions, became a deterrent to continued involvement and any development of commitment to civic and social responsibility” (p. 534).
A larger study by Marks and Jones (2004) reaffirmed the findings of Jones and Hill (2003). While this research also focused on community service participation during the transition from high school to college, Marks and Jones’ study provided specific implications for college professionals regarding community service requirements. They concluded that:

Requiring community service of college students is not a policy we would recommend based on the negative effects of mandated service among high school students. While the requirement may also spark interest in volunteering in some students, who would not have otherwise considered service, we advocate efforts to develop positive norms for service among students. (p. 334)

Jones, Marks, and Hill, along with other researchers (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhodes, 1998) suggested that incorporating service into the fabric of students’ lives through more holistic venues, including service-learning, and creating a campus-wide culture of service lead to increased service participation, a sense of increased civic responsibility, and life-long commitments to serving others.

Research Questions

In exploring how mandatory service requirements affect college students’ community service experiences, this study focused on answering the following questions related specifically to service requirements within college honors societies and scholarship programs:

1. What outcomes do students reach by completing community service requirements?
2. What correlation, if any, exists between mandatory community service, students’ academic pursuits, and their development as engaged citizens?
3. What effect does required community service have on students’ intentions to engage in future community service opportunities?

The answers to these questions will assist student affairs administrators in determining how to best structure community service components within honors societies and other student organizations. Intentionally designed service experiences will help students connect their community service participation to academic inquiry and engaged citizenship.

Research Design

In order to collect a large data sample, suited to generalize data beyond the institution, a quantitative survey method was determined to be most effective. A research proposal was submitted to the university’s institutional review board. This proposal contained the research questions, research design, consent forms, and the survey instrument.

Participants

All participants in this study were members of a university-wide scholarship...
program and represented four participating honors organizations, each funded and administered by a separate school or college within the university. A fifth participating group was composed of underrepresented minority students from across all the undergraduate colleges at the university. Membership in these scholars programs is based on exceptional academic performance in high school and high standardized test scores. Members of the scholars programs are offered large (often full-tuition) scholarships, opportunities for international travel, unique educational colloquia, and invitations to social events. These scholars programs serve primarily as an incentive to recruit outstanding high school students to attend the university.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, with 75% being female and 23% being male; two participants identified as gender queer. The diverse student sample included participants with a broad range of academic interests and majors.

Instrument

The survey instrument used in this study was designed by the researcher to address the study’s specific research questions. A portion of the survey tool was modeled after an instrument designed by McCarthy and Tucker (1999). Questions were based on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very important or always) to 5 (not important or never) with a midpoint of 3 (somewhat important or sometimes). In order to simplify the data collection process, the survey was converted to an online format and administered by an internet-based survey management service.

Methods

An invitation to participate in the study was e-mailed to the 180 undergraduate student members of the participating scholars programs. This first e-mail invitation yielded 70 complete survey responses. After 10 days, a follow-up email was sent to remind students of the opportunity to participate in the study. An additional 28 students completed the online survey. Before beginning the survey, students confirmed their consent to participate in the study online. Those who chose not to sign the consent form were directed away from the online survey and returned to the institution’s primary web page.

The survey tool was composed of 20 questions. Some questions were designed in a matrix format and contained multiple sub-questions within the larger question category. After completing the final survey question, a thank you message was displayed containing contact information for the researcher and faculty sponsor.

Information on the specific structure of the community service requirement was collected from the advisors of each participating scholars group. Advisors were asked to complete the Community Service Requirement Questionnaire. This document asked the advisors to self-report the structure of their community service requirement, including their system for reporting service participation and any reflective tools or exercises used to critically engage students in their service.
experiences.

Data Collection

Data was compiled and stored electronically by the online survey-management service in an online database and converted to a spreadsheet format. The researcher then exported the data into statistic database software to assist with data analysis. Of 98 surveys submitted, 87 contained the complete data sets required for use in the study. The 11 incomplete responses were discarded and deleted from the database.

Limitations

While the data collected in this study serves to answer basic questions regarding the positive and negative outcomes of student participation in required community service, two substantial limitations to the study deserve discussion. Despite clear patterns in the collected data, it is important to note that the conclusions reached from this study may differ from other situations where community service is required of a group of students. For instance, a group of students participating in mandatory community service as a disciplinary measure might provide substantially different data than did the honors students participating in this study. The conclusions reached by this study should only be considered relevant when comparing a population similar to the one studied (i.e. honors program participants at a private research university).

Further, the data collected provides a snapshot of students’ perceptions regarding their service participation and intended future participation based on one point in time. A longitudinal study tracking students’ continued levels of participation in community service over a one to three year period would provide a more complete picture of the long-term outcomes resulting from mandatory service participation.

Analysis

Three significant patterns related to the research questions emerged from an analysis of the data set. It is important to note that the presence of a community service requirement produced virtually no effect on the amount of service conducted by members of the scholars programs. Of the students surveyed, 69% participated in community service activities more than once a month during the given academic year. Comparatively, 66.7% of these students were participating in community service at the same frequency before joining the scholars group. This data indicates that the majority of students selected for membership in a scholars group were already active community service participants in high school. The presence of the community service requirement may have provided an extrinsic incentive for students to continue participating in community service; however, the requirement did not increase their frequency of participation (Figure 1, Figure 2). No significant change was noted in students with the highest or lowest pre-college participation rates. Furthermore, over half the reporting members (60.7%) exceeded the number of service hours required. Of those who
Figure 1. Participation in community service activities during high school.

Figure 2. Participation in community service activities while a member of a scholars group.
exceeded the service requirement, 52% volunteered more than 10 additional hours per term.

It is also important to note that a considerable percentage of students attended community service projects with other members of their scholars group. Notably, 51% of participants reported that they sometimes, often, or always attend projects with their scholars group. Only two categories (out of the nine observed) exceeded this percentage: those attending projects alone or attending projects with one friend (Figure 3). A preferred social arrangement for completing the service requirement was with fellow members of the scholars groups, instead of participating in projects organized by other campus offices or student organizations.

Another important pattern that emerged from this study is that members of the scholars programs often connect their service participation to academic pursuits and career goals. The survey reported participants’ intentions for engaging in seven specific academic or intellectual activities related to their service participation (Figure 4).

Perhaps the most salient pattern to emerge from the data set is that members of the scholars programs are highly likely to continue their participation in community service. Students reported high levels of interest in continuing to serve with the same projects they worked with over the past year and even greater interest in serving with similar projects (Figure 5). Most (72.6%) of the participants reported that they are either likely or highly likely to volunteer with the same
Figure 4. Participation in academic/reflective activities related to service experiences.

Figure 5. Students' expectations of continuing to serve with the same service project.
projects, while 83.1% intend to volunteer with similar projects.

Implications for Practice

As the data indicates, members of the scholars program are not participating in community service more frequently than before they joined the organization. However, contrary to the findings of other studies (Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004), members of the scholars groups have not decreased their participation due to the presence of a requirement. Advisors of honors colleges, honors societies, and other campus organizations need to make informed decisions regarding whether or not requiring community service will promote or hinder their desired positive outcomes. Leaders should conduct surveys, interviews, or focus groups with their members to determine if a service requirement produces positive, negative, or neutral effects. It is also recommended that advisors experiment with assessing service participation through creative activities including reflective journal entries, student-facilitated discussions, and multimedia presentations showcasing service experiences.

Since many members report attending community service projects with fellow group members, it is important that the scholars groups expand upon the number of high-quality service opportunities they sponsor and promote. Creating a long-term relationship with a specific non-profit organization can provide ongoing opportunities for students to serve with other current members and alumni. Positive outcomes may also be reached by increasing the amount of time spent reflecting on service activities within scholars program meetings and events. While it is important for students to discuss their service experiences with friends (the most popular audience for such reflection identified in this study), it is also highly valuable for students to share their thoughts with their advisor and other members of their scholars group through thoughtfully-designed reflective activities.

Finally, there is great value in developing opportunities for students to integrate their community service experiences into larger areas of intellectual inquiry and academic interest. Advisors and faculty can encourage students to create these connections by conducting one-on-one conversations with members to help pair specific service opportunities with each student’s personal and career interests.

Conclusion

This study finds that requiring community service as a criterion for membership in an honors organization provides some positive outcomes related to students intentions to engage in continued service. However, while requiring community service within an undergraduate honors organization encourages students to maintain their previous levels participation in community service, the presence of a requirement does not encourage a greater level of participation. The data suggests that while the practice of requiring community service is moderately effective in some areas, consideration should also be given to alternative means of promoting civic engagement that may provide more successful results. Most
importantly, leaders of honors organizations and student groups should reflect on the values and outcomes they desire students to reach through participation in community service. The impacts of a potent community service experience and the reflective activities which follow often prove more valuable than a simple log of community service participation hours.
References


Exploring a New Dimension of College Student Retention: Undergraduate Leaves of Absence

Staci Lynne Hersh

While issues of undergraduate retention have gained significant attention in recent years, little has yet been devoted to the study of college students who take a Leave of Absence (excused withdrawal from the semester) with the intention to return. Through document analysis of student academic files at a large, private, urban university from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, this paper explores undergraduate Leaves of Absence (LOAs) as a new dimension in student retention and promotes the importance of holistically supporting students both prior to their LOAs and upon their reintegration into the college.

According to a 2006 national report published by the U.S. Department of Education, over two million students enter their first year of college annually; however, an alarming 45% of all undergraduates drop out each year, failing to complete their degrees (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1982). As a result, researchers, policy-makers, and student affairs practitioners have become increasingly interested in developing retention strategies and support services to help maintain students’ academic enrollment. One approach, often found at large or competitive institutions, is a policy allowing students to take a Leave of Absence (LOA), defined as an excused withdrawal from a semester for up to one academic year due to extenuating circumstances. A random search of American postsecondary institutions revealed that policies for undergraduate LOAs vary widely from school to school, and, in many large institutions, the guidelines and procedures are separate and independently structured for each college within a given university. This stratification of governance and policies regarding LOAs complicates the system and makes it more difficult for students to directly connect with necessary services and supports. As a result, students who are unaware of or do not have access to this alternative route for completing their degree may be more likely to deal with external interferences by dropping out of college.

Existing Research on Undergraduate Leaves of Absence

While Tinto’s 1975 report on college student retention has inspired numerous researchers to consider how academic and social integration into college affect a student’s likelihood to graduate, several criticisms have challenged the adequa-

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cy and reproached the non-generalizability of his “student integration model.” Similarly, although a great deal of the literature has analyzed the ways in which an individual’s college preparedness and compatibility with the institution contribute to undergraduate attrition, none have yet considered how an LOA factors into the retention equation and how it affects academic success and overall graduation rates.

In examining the large-scale effects LOAs have on institutional retention rates, it is also necessary to consider how this policy impacts individual success for students at risk of dropping out before completing their degree. Both Hoffman, Ganz, and Dorosin (1974) and Meilman, Manley, Gaylor, and Turco (1992) found that the majority of students who have gone on LOAs have considered their time away to have been beneficial, as a considerable number of “grade point average[s] improved significantly after return from the withdrawal, with a large jump in individual term averages occurring between the terms immediately preceding and immediately following return” (Meilman et al., p. 217). However, these 1974 and 1992 studies focused on students whose LOAs were specifically mental health related and did not consider students who take LOAs for personal or financial reasons. Therefore, while such research certainly paved the way for future studies on undergraduate LOAs, it failed to address the issue of college student retention for all at-risk students and the relationship between this policy and practice.

Research Questions & Method

In response to this apparent lack of current knowledge regarding students who take LOAs, a study was conducted in 2006 to gauge why these students are taking LOAs today and how student affairs professionals might enhance support services so common needs may be addressed proactively. The study was conducted at a liberal arts college (6,500 undergraduates) housed within a large, private, urban university, using data recorded in the College’s official Leave of Absence database from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006. Through this document analysis, the study explored the reasons why students take LOAs, examined the distribution of LOAs for males versus females at the College, recorded the rate at which these LOAs were extended to the full year, and tracked continuing trends as predictors for the future.

Leave of Absence Policy and Procedure

Guidelines for the College’s official LOA policy are listed in the Academic Policies section of the school’s academic bulletin, which can be accessed electronically through the College website. In very brief terms the policy currently states, “students who wish to be out of attendance from the College for one semester or an academic year may be granted an official Leave of Absence” (2004, p. 238). In order to be granted an LOA, students are required to meet with an academic advisor to discuss their reasons for leaving, as well as the effects it will have on the future of their academic career. While undergraduates must petition for an LOA through this formal process, the mandatory one-on-one academic advising
meeting most often results in advisor approval.

Limitations

When students request an LOA, their reason for leaving is determined and recorded as either Personal/Financial, Counseling, Medical (physical), Academic Probation, or Non-University (Non-U) Study Abroad/Travel in the official LOA database. Due to this pre-designation of categories, the causes of LOAs could not be redefined, specified, or sub-categorized within more descriptive groupings. Moreover, while this study only offers trends and statistics for students within one specific college, it is this researcher’s hope that other institutions and practitioners may find the assessment to be a meaningful evaluation and representation of many undergraduate students who take LOAs. Due to the sensitivity of situations surrounding students’ reasons for taking LOAs, this assessment was limited to a document analysis, with no opportunity to gain further insight from the students themselves.

Data Analysis

What is the distribution of students’ reasons for taking an LOA?

Document analysis of the LOA database revealed Personal/Financial LOAs to be significantly and consistently the most common reason cited each semester and throughout the five years studied. In fact, of the 960 total undergraduate LOAs taken from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, 592 LOAs were attributed to Personal/Financial reasons. This means 61.7% of the total LOAs fall into a category that is least descriptive, limiting the potential for an insightful conclusion based on this portion of the data. Non-U Study Abroad/Travel (students who traveled or studied internationally independent of the College’s formal study abroad programs) accounted for the second-highest total of 190 students (19.8%). Counseling-related reasons were cited by 107 students (11.1%), while 57 students (5.9%) took Medical (physical) LOAs. Finally, Academic Probation was the least common reason for taking an LOA, with just 14 students (1.5%). Figure 1 illustrates these trends in LOAs over the five years studied.

Figure 1:
Types of LOAs cited and recorded over 5 years (Fall 2001 - Spring 2006).
From which causes for taking an LOA are students most likely to take Extensions?

When an academic advisor at the College approves an LOA petition, the student is granted one excused semester. However, if more time off is necessary, the student may petition for an Extension of the LOA, which would permit them to stay out another semester (students are allowed a maximum of two semesters of LOAs over the course of their academic careers). As with the petitions for LOAs, petitions for an Extension of LOAs are usually granted. Any additional time off beyond these two semesters requires the student to withdraw from the College completely and formally reapply prior to their anticipated return. According to the data, 10% of the total LOAs recorded from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006 were extended. While most were Extensions of Personal/Financial LOAs, the percentages shown in Table 1 illustrate that students on Academic Probation and Medical (physical) LOAs were actually more likely to extend their time away.

Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize the disparity between the number of Extensions of LOAs taken in the Spring, as compared to the Fall semesters. Figure 2 expresses this with four distinct peaks during the Spring, and drastic dips in the number of Extensions granted in Fall 2002, Fall 2003, and Fall 2005. Overall, petitions for Extensions seem to be following a declining trend, as a mere 8 students extended their LOAs in Spring 2006 as opposed to the 20 students who extended their LOAs in Spring 2002.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-U Study Abroad/Travel</th>
<th>Personal/Financial</th>
<th>Counseling</th>
<th>Academic Probation</th>
<th>Medical (physical)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-year Total Leaves</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-year Total Extensions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Students Extending Leave</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2:
The number of students taking Extensions of LOAs in the Spring semesters is significantly higher than the number of students extending their LOAs during the Fall semesters.
What are the gender distinctions (if any) between students taking LOAs?

Of the nearly 6,500 undergraduates enrolled in the College each academic year from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, the average gender division of roughly 39.5% male to 60.5% female remained consistent (Fact Book, 2004). Fascinatingly, the percentage ratio of male and female students taking LOAs each year is fairly representative of this average school-wide gender division. In fact, the gender ratios between males and females within each specific category of LOAs were also proportionately distributed. From Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, nearly twice as many females were represented in each category of LOAs as compared to the number of males. The male-to-female ratio for students taking Extensions on their LOAs was also representative of the overall distribution, with males representing just 34% (37 students) extending their LOAs, as compared to the 66% (71) females who were approved for the maximum of one year away.

What are the five-year trends for students taking LOAs?

A comparison of LOAs taken during the Fall 2001/Spring 2002 academic year as compared to the Fall 2005/Spring 2006 semesters, shows an overall 37.1% decrease in the total number of students on LOAs. On a smaller scale, Table 2 illustrates a steady and consistent .4% (± 0.1) decrease in the percentage of students taking LOAs during each of the five academic years measured.

In assessing the five-year trends in the types of LOAs taken each semester from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006 (Figure 1), it becomes clear that more students take Counseling Leaves, Non-U Study Abroad/Travel Leaves, and Extensions of LOAs during the Spring semester, while, for unknown reasons, Personal/Financial Leaves are most often taken in the Fall. Furthermore, while the total number of students taking LOAs each year and within each category has been on a steady decline since Fall 2001, Figure 1 illustrates a positive trend in the number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel Leaves taken over the five academic years measured. In fact, from Fall 2005 to Spring 2006 alone, there was a significant leap in the number of students traveling internationally through out-
side officially sanctioned study abroad programs (at branch campuses abroad and official exchange programs). While the five-year trends suggest the numbers will dip again in Fall 2006, the overall data implies the total number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel LOAs will continue on this upward climb.

Implications for Practice: Making Sense of the Data

*Personal/Financial causes are consistently the most prevalent reason for taking an LOA.*

With such a high number of LOAs being filed as Personal/Financial, it has become extremely difficult to track and understand how the institution can best support and address the needs of these students. Despite the existence of university-wide outreach and support programs, it is challenging to reach out to students whose needs are cloaked under such generalizations. Thus, it is essential that students' reasons for taking a Personal LOA be more specifically identified and measured. Such efforts would provide student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administrators with more information about how best to support today's college students. With this insight, universities can more effectively serve a constituency that may have been too long overlooked. In other words, though it is important to respect the privacy of students by not insisting they disclose the details of the difficulties or circumstances imposing the need for them to take time off, student affairs practitioners and administrators cannot expect to fully meet the needs of students if left uninformed of their true concerns.

*Twice as many females as males represent the total number of students taking LOAs each year.*

Because the College's undergraduate class has consistently enrolled about twice as many females as males each year, it is difficult to decipher whether the proportion of males to females taking undergraduate LOAs is merely representative of the larger student population, or whether female students are actually more likely to take Leaves of Absence than their male counterparts.

*Students on Medical (physical) or Academic Probation LOAs are most likely to take Extensions.*

While Personal/Financial reasons are consistently the most common justifications for LOAs, it is interesting to note that only 13% of students within that category extend the LOA to the maximum of two semesters. On the other hand, Medical (physical) and Academic Probation LOAs, which are least cited each term, represent the categories with the largest proportion of students who request Extensions. While Extensions of Medical (physical) LOAs are fairly self-explanatory and usually out of the hands of the university, it is somewhat disconcerting to see 21.4% of those on Academic Probation LOAs extend their time away to an entire year.

These results suggest that students on Academic Probation require enhanced support and communication from academic advisors and administrators while on their LOAs. It may even be in the students' best interest for the academic advisor to implement a formal or informal plan of action for the student to follow.
during their time away. Encouraging students to speak with an academic advisor about the goals of their LOAs and about a plan of objectives to achieve while away may help ensure that all LOAs, in all categories, are supportive of and not detrimental to students’ personal well-being and academic success upon return.

The total number of students taking LOAs has steadily decreased each year and within each category since Fall 2001—with the exception of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel. With more students traveling internationally and studying abroad outside of University-established programs each year, it is important to ensure that the resources to support this growing interest are available and easily accessible to all college students. With one of the largest and most renowned international study abroad programs, this University sends over 2,000 students to eight University-sponsored abroad sites each year. Therefore, this increase in the number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel LOAs is not decreasing the number of students traveling to University-sponsored programs, but rather, is enhancing and broadening international study opportunities for a greater number of students. In an effort to most effectively serve these students, it is important that academic advisors be trained in how to best work with and provide resources for students interested in study abroad programs not offered by the university.

This phenomenon of increased Non-U Study Abroad/Travel may also explain much of the reason why slightly more students take their LOAs in the Spring as opposed to the Fall, since a Spring LOA allows an additional unofficial “extension” through the summer. Also, with a significant number of students on LOAs during each semester, it is crucial that academic departments offer their required courses in both the Fall and the Spring to ensure students taking an LOA do not have difficulty advancing toward their degree within prospective major fields.

Future Research

The results of this assessment on undergraduate LOAs have uncovered the depth and breadth of this topic while revealing the importance of pursuing more extensive research in order to answer questions surrounding the relationship between undergraduate LOAs and the compelling issue of college student retention. In an effort to address this timely problem and expand upon the limited research currently available on undergraduate LOAs, it is the researcher’s intention to use these findings as a foundation upon which further research can be conducted and informed.

In an effort to create a more accurate profile of the broad and non-descriptive Personal/Financial LOA category, future studies should consider the ways in which demographic characteristics, such as students’ class year, major, enrollment status (transfer/full-time/part-time), ethnicity, and hometown region correlate with the rate of return from, and degree completion for, students who take an LOA. In addition, it would be meaningful to address whether these temporary withdrawals are met with outcomes of success (e.g., long-term retention and graduation), while determining the relationship between undergraduate LOAs and overall institutional and national retention rates.
Conclusion

While the implications reached through this extensive document analysis offer new insight and inspire opportunity for practical implementation, a great deal remains unknown regarding why students take LOAs and the impact LOAs have on college student retention and academic success. Nevertheless, these current and future findings can aid faculty and student affairs practitioners in gaining a more complex understanding of undergraduate needs, while helping empower policy-makers and administrators to enhance the visibility of and access to this temporary withdrawal option as an effective retention tool for students at-risk. By engaging in an exploration of this new dimension of college student retention, universities nationwide may gain further insight into the changing needs of today’s college students, and in doing so, can ensure that university services holistically support these students throughout the entire LOA process.
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Challenges for Urban Institutions: Creating Community and Personal Connections

Thomas Ellett, Ph.D.

Connecting students to their college and their community has been a primary goal for many higher education institutions. Urban institutions have added challenges in creating links based on many aspects of urban living. One institution has attempted to use living/learning communities to enhance use and comfort with the city, to increase personal involvement and activity within the urban center, enhance peer connections, and assist with retention and overall satisfaction with the institution. This paper will review the findings of a study to determine to what degree the living/learning programs have been able to meet their stated objectives.

Attending college can be one of the most exciting, yet scary experiences for the approximately two million freshmen who enter higher education each year (Tabs, 2003). In college, students face many challenges, including isolation, financial pressures, and the stresses associated with both the academic and social aspects of college integrations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These stressors are particularly acute for individuals attending urban universities, where students encounter even more distractions from their academic goals (Elliott, 1994). An urban college environment poses greater challenges because of increased expenses, disparate service locations, limited community connections, safety and security concerns (Elliott), and the latest threat, terrorism (Baroch, 2004).

Colleges have responded by implementing ways to connect students to one another and to the institution and the community. One recent method is the use of learning communities, which are defined as, “groups of students enrolled in courses together, supported by an intentional structure to help students find coherence in their learning outside of the classroom” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 6). “Residential learning communities are further defined as including a residential component, where members live together in a campus housing facility” (Fike, 1999, p. 270) or as “opportunities for clusters of students to live together and attend classes together” (Zeller, 1998, p. 3). Researchers have found positive influences from the learning community movement, including better academic outcomes (Gabelnick, 1990), increased interactions between faculty and students (Tinto & Love, 1995), and a greater sense of community (Romanoff, 2000). This study builds on earlier findings and provides
further inquiry into the effects of students living together in themed housing floors and learning communities within an urban setting.

The Program

The residential learning community model used for this study was implemented at a large metropolitan institution on floor communities each having an interdisciplinary interest-based theme. Each themed floor had a designated full-time faculty affiliate, who planned bi-monthly program excursions and had frequent informal interactions with the students on the floor. Faculty members received a stipend for their service.

The learning community programs examined each had approximately 30 students living on a floor, housed together under a non-discipline based theme or interest. Students applied to the themed floor prior to arriving at the institution. The faculty affiliates were selected for the role based on their desire to work with a themed floor of particular interest.

What is an Urban Campus?

Elliott (1994) described a city “as a large metropolitan area” (p. 24) and an urban college as:

one that is located in a city that is engaged with the diversity of people within the community it serves, and that determines its institutional philosophy on the way it sees itself in relation to its environment and to the community in which it is located. It becomes part and parcel of the metropolitan milieu. (p. 23)

Many urban universities are situated in “open campuses” without borders to isolate them from the local community. Creating a sense of community for students in these types of institutions is difficult. “Closed campuses”, or “traditional campuses”, offer students a more secluded experience in which the institution is considered its own entity (Elliott). Many students choose to attend an “open” urban institution because of the vast array of cultural, social, and career opportunities that are easily accessible (Elliott).

In urban settings, the challenge of building community is increased by this “competition” for the attention of students. To combat this situation, institutions in urban settings are spending more time making connections between their students and the city environment with more cultural, social, and community service-type activities (Elliott, 1994).

Building Community on Campus

Connecting students to the institution and to each other is a prime objective for the business of higher education (Gardner, 1986). The Boyer commission commented in Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities (1998), “by admitting students, any college or university commits itself to provide maximum opportunities for intellectual and creative development” (p.12).
McDonald and Associates (2002) explained that college campuses “have a need for community; it is a primal yearning and a practical necessity. Community is supported by shared purpose, shared commitment, shared relationships, and shared responsibility” (p. 3). The shared experience of learning creates opportunities for personal and communal growth. Community development leads to positive outcomes such as student development and retention (Tinto, 1993); however, lack of involvement in activities and not spending time in social gatherings are seen as barriers to building community (Astin, 1993). Many environmental factors such as lack of space and overcrowding do not support community development (Moos, 1986), and these environmental factors are magnified in an urban setting (Elliott, 1994).

Students residing on campus have significant opportunities to engage with others at their institution (Winston & Anchors, 1993). Many institutions mandate a residency requirement to ensure that students are exposed to the educational gains and social connections living on campus provides (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994). Among the 950 member institutions of the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) that completed the 2003 annual membership renewal data, over 40% of members required first-year students to live in college residences (Association of College and University Housing Officers- International, 2003).

Significance of the Study

Significant research shows the benefits of learning communities on college campuses (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kellogg, 1999; Romanoff, 2000; Smith, 1991; Tinto & Love, 1995). The positive impact of the learning community movement concept has been supported by increased academic and social skills that support learning (St. Onge, 2002) and more involvement in academic and social activities outside the classroom (Tinto & Love, 1995).

Learning communities attempt to increase the amount of interaction students have with faculty and with one another. Findings support increased connections between students and a strong feeling of social integration with one another (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Smith, 1991; Tinto & Love, 1995). Romanoff (2000) found that students in learning communities felt a greater sense of overall community. As the learning community movement has evolved and research indicates positive outcomes, little has been studied on students’ perceptions of their own experiences living in residential learning communities in urban settings.

Methodology

This study surveyed residential students who attend a large, metropolitan institution to determine the connection, if any, between a series of outcome variables. A sampling of sophomore level students who participated in a learning community during the previous year as freshmen, were asked to complete a “pilot test,” commenting on question items that were confusing or difficult to answer. These vulnerabilities were addressed in the final instrument. After receiving feedback,
the survey was administered to a group of doctoral students who tested for validity and reliability. Through this process, an original instrument called the College Urban Residential Experience Survey (CURES), was given to three treatment groups, which included: (a) students enrolled in residential themed learning communities; (b) students enrolled in academic learning communities, this program had students taking courses together; and (c) students not enrolled in either type of learning community. The participants were first-year students who had completed the first semester of their college career.

Survey Instrument
The utilization of technology as a means to collect data has grown substantially since the late 1990s. Topp and Pawloski (2002) provided reasons that researchers would benefit from the online technique to include, “accuracy, ease and speed of data entry, immediate results feedback to participant, and ease of access of data and results” (p. 175). Sax, Gilmartin, and Bryant (2003) suggested further benefits, stating “web option provides a time and cost savings option for data collection, and it is especially appealing to studies on college students, as they are more apt to complete” (p. 409–410).

In two studies, researchers (Bandilla, Bosnjak, & Altdorfer, 2003; Sax et al., 2003;) indicated that college students in the past few years were more apt to complete online surveys than pen and paper surveys because of ease of use and ability to finish on their own time. The study by Sax et al. utilized the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey for 2001, similar to the sampling set utilized in this study, and noted that in the case of college students, it is critical that they have easy access to computers to increase their response rates.

The survey was administered via the Internet. It contained 53 multiple-choice questions and item sets asking respondents their pre-college disposition toward their college experience and the types of activities in which they participated in college. It also asked the respondents about their perceptions of the academic and social climate in their residence hall and their involvement with peers.

Validity
To utilize a survey instrument, it must meet certain standards of reliability and validity. Validity refers to the extent to which a specific measurement provides data that relates to commonly accepted meanings of a particular concept (Babbie, 1995), that is, measuring what it was designed to measure. Content validity refers to the necessary agreement of 80% of respondents that an item fits into a particular subscale. Since many of the items were demographic or pertained to overall satisfaction, the validation process focused on the subscales. Sixteen doctoral students assisted in assessing the content validity of the CURES instrument. Each was given a list of 23 items and asked to match the items with one of the seven subscales that they believed most closely related to each other. If an item did not obtain an 80% agreement with the participants, it was either modified or removed from the instrument (Babbie, 1995).
Reliability
Using a method developed by Latham and Wexley (1981), the researcher tested levels of reliability by asking a group of doctoral students to sort scrambled items from the CURES survey instrument into their respective rubrics. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was tabulated to determine the reliability of the items, with a .70 or higher considered reliable.
Survey Response

Responses to the survey were coded by each learning community so that they could be assigned to the appropriate treatment groups. All students in the learning communities and a random sampling of the remainder of the entire first-year student residential population were invited to join the study. A larger number of surveys were sent to non-participants than to students participating in the learning communities. An overall response rate for the survey was 212, or 52.86%, for the themed and academic communities, compared to 214, or 37.02%, for the non-participants.

Results

Use of and Comfort with the City

The study attempted to determine the degree to which students in each group (learning community and non-participants) utilized the city in which the institution is located, and their comfort level in doing so. The learning communities at the experiment institution attempted to take advantage of its unique urban location. “Each of the programs capitalizes on our unique location within the city community by connecting the themes to the city” (Explorations Living Learning Communities Brochure, 2004). An analysis of variance between and among the groups was conducted. Table 1 describes the differences between the groups.

Students in the academic learning community felt very safe in the city, with a mean of 4.78 on a five-point scale and SD = .13, followed by the themed learning community at 4.51 and SD = .05. The non-participants were lowest, at 4.43 and SD = .05. The difference between groups was significant using an ANOVA at (p<.05).

Students in all three treatment groups rated their utilization of the city as above average, with mean scores of 4.44 for the academic learning community, 4.15 for non-participants, and 4.07 for the themed learning communities. There was no significant difference between the groups in the level of city utilization, but the high means indicate the institution had been successful in integrating the city into the student experience.

Involvement in Activities

To determine the difference among the three groups in relation to the level of student involvement, an ANOVA was performed. As illustrated in Table 2, the academic learning community members had a much stronger level of social involvement with their peers, with a mean score of 4.22, followed by the themed learning community at 3.97, and the non-participants at 3.64. The differences were significant at the value of (p<.001).

In regard to the intervening variable for peer academic involvement, the findings suggest that the groups did not have any significant differences (p<.08). The mean scores of the three groups were not expected, as the non-participants had the highest mean score 3.67, followed by the themed learning community, 3.64, and then by the academic learning community, 3.26. Based on the students shar-
ing a course together that met three times a week in the residence hall, coupled with themed excursions and dialogues with faculty, it was unexpected that students would not be more engaged in academic endeavors as a group. These findings contradict earlier studies (Kellogg, 1999; Tinto & Love, 1995).

The third level of involvement was the intervening variable for students to identify their level of personal involvement at formal activities and campus programs with their peers. There was a significant difference among the three groups (p<.001). The themed learning community had a higher level of involvement with campus activities, with a mean score of 2.95, than both the academic learning community at 2.51 or the non-participants at 2.31. It was expected that students in structured experiences would be more active than their peers who lived randomly in the residence hall system.

Table 3
Comparison of Connectedness and Feeling of Community by Treatment Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLC</td>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>.25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participant</td>
<td>3.58b</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>205</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor Community is Well-connected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TLC</td>
<td>3.87a</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALC</td>
<td>3.78a*</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participant</td>
<td>3.38b*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>206</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in each row not sharing a common subscript differ at p<.04 or less, except for means in each row not sharing a common subscript that are both starred, which differ at p=.15 or less. TLC = themed learning community; ALC = academic learning community.

Peer Connectedness by Group

The next area of interest was to determine the level of connectedness of peers and the sense of community students felt on their residence hall floor. To analyze this question, an ANOVA was run between the three treatment groups as shown in Table 3.

For the questions related to their commitment to others at the institution, the students in the academic learning community had a mean score of 4.26, followed by the themed learning community with a 3.97, and the non-participants mean score of 3.58. This finding was significant at p<.01. This finding is consistent with previous research (Tinto & Love, 1995), and demonstrates the positive role of intentionally structuring the student experience.

In the area of students feeling connected to their floor, the themed learning community (mean score of 3.87) led the academic learning community (3.78) and the non-participant group (3.38). The finding was significant at p<.01. The structured themed programs offered an enhanced level of connection to their fellow floor
Discussion

The urban residential learning community delivered very positive and significant differences among the three treatment groups. This supports the importance of these intentionally structured learning experiences for students. Through these experiences, students were able to form smaller communal groups with others who share similar interests. They could then support each other through the challenge of being a first-year student on a large urban campus.

The three most significant positive differences found in the academic learning communities in comparison to the themed learning communities and the non-participant groups were (a) a higher level of comfort utilizing the urban area surrounding the campus, (b) a higher level of involvement in community activities, and (c) a stronger commitment to others in their community.

Another finding was the significant differences seen in the themed learning community over the academic learning community and in the academic learning community over non-participants. Two significant differences were a stronger sense of community and greater student involvement in activities on the floor. The residential learning communities were created in part to use a theme, or common interest among students, to bring them together in their exploration of the city. The themed floors required students to attend and actively engage in programs throughout the semester. Both findings suggest that some of the goals of the program had been realized.

Limitations of the Study

Drawing generalizable conclusions from this data may be difficult because of the limitations of the study. The short time frame during which the students participated in the learning community may have not allowed for the experience to have a long-term effect. First-semester student participation in campus life may be different than at other times during the college career. Students’ lives are complex, and transition issues for first-semester students often take time and energy to overcome.

This study focused on one large urban institution. The findings might not be duplicated at other urban institutions. Additionally, while each of the learning communities had similar goals, they did have different environments and various faculty and staff working with the student populations. The design of this study featured a quantitative analysis of the key outcome variables, such as levels of involvement and commitment, intention to return to the institution, satisfaction, and comfort with and utilization of the urban setting. The research methodology did not address the valuable learning that could emerge from qualitative analysis.

Students in the learning communities all self-selected to be in the experience.
Some research has indicated that students who choose to live in learning communities may be more apt to have higher levels of participation and satisfaction, and be more motivated overall as students. Although this is not a universal finding from researchers, it has been raised in some research.

Conclusion

Student success, connection to peers, and retention are enhanced by a student’s connection to an institution. Experiences such as the themed and academic learning communities studied in this project create opportunities for students to become more academically and socially connected, thus aiding in the student’s overall development and enjoyment of that institution (Astin, 1993; Gardner, 1986; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

This study supports earlier findings that learning community members had higher utilization and connection to their peers and a stronger sense of overall community. Peer social involvement was found to have a statistically significant difference at p<.001 for the themed and academic learning communities compared to non-participants. They also had a higher commitment to their peers than non-participants at the p<.01 level and felt more connected to their floor than non-participants at the p<.01 level.

The findings of this study suggest that learning community participants have a higher level of utilization of peers for assistance and a stronger connection to others, are more involved in activities, and feel safer in utilizing the city environment than non-participants. The results encourage urban institutions to further think about how they could better structure students’ exposure to the city in a way that is meaningful and worthwhile. Having the resources of a city environment is important. Fully exploiting that setting for the purposes of enhancing the educational process would greatly benefit both students and urban institutions.
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The Effects of Informal Faculty-Student Interactions on Academic and Social Integration in First-Year Students

Michael West

It has been argued that student persistence and success is determined considerably by experiences and attitudes adopted during the freshman year. One way in which institutions of higher education are working to increase student satisfaction and achievement is by encouraging—through mentoring programs and environmental design—informal faculty-student interactions outside the classroom setting. The notion of academic and social integration of students into an institution involves numerous factors that can essentially be grouped into three diverse yet interrelated components: (1) transitioning to college and understanding expectations, (2) relating to the environment, and (3) academic success and working towards career goals. The influence of informal faculty-student interactions on each of these elements will be discussed through a review of current research.

Much of the current literature on student persistence and achievement in higher education focuses on the creation and implementation of programs designed to increase student involvement in college. Specifically, institutions are striving more than ever to enhance the first-year experience. It has been argued that student persistence and success is determined considerably by experiences and attitudes adopted during the freshman year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). One way in which institutions of higher education are working to increase student achievement and satisfaction in the freshman year is by encouraging—through mentoring programs and environmental design—informal faculty-student interactions outside the classroom setting. This paper will provide a review of the current research on informal faculty-student interactions with specific attention given to how these interactions affect students’ satisfaction with their college experience and influence their current and future goals. The types of interactions with faculty that students find most beneficial, the effects of increased interactions between students and faculty, and programs that student affairs practitioners can implement to encourage informal faculty-student interactions will also be discussed.

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Existing Research on Informal Faculty-Student Interactions

Significance of Academic and Social Integration in Persistence
To understand the significant impact informal faculty-student interactions can have on a student’s integration into an institutional community, it is important first to examine what developmental characteristics have been found to contribute to a student’s satisfaction and persistence at a particular university. In his examination of dropouts from higher education, Spady (1970) explained that persistence requires a clear and realistic set of goals that are in agreement with institutional values and faculty expectations. He argued that the process of dropping out was a result of the relationship between a student’s personal characteristics, the environment of the particular institution, and the influence and demands placed on the student by coursework, faculty members, peers and family. Basing his ideas on the findings presented by Durkheim (1951) in his paper on suicide and its social characteristics, Spady posited that students need to achieve integration with a university’s attitudes and influences both intellectually and socially. If this congruence is not achieved, students will be more likely to disengage from their social system and surrounding environment. Whereas in Durkheim’s model the final effect of this detachment is suicide, Spady’s paradigm contends that disconnection from the environment of the college greatly increases a student’s likelihood of dropping out.

Building off of Spady’s concepts of institutional integration, Tinto (1975) devised a theoretical model for dropout:

The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems... continually modify his (or her) goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

In other words, a student’s achievement and satisfaction is determined by the interchange between the goal of completing college and the individual’s commitment to the institution, both of which are constantly affected by the student’s interactions with the academic and social environments of the institution. The significance of both academic and social integration in student persistence has been corroborated by various other studies (Centra & Rock, 1971; Johnson, 1989; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1975).

The Freshman Connection
The integration of students into the academic and social environments of an institution is especially important during a student’s first year in higher education (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). In his theory of student involvement and development, Astin (1984) argued that the more actively involved a student can be in his or her college experience, the easier that student will connect to his or her environment. Involvement, defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, p. 518), is directly proportional to the individual’s development and institutional integra-
tion. This bond, termed the “freshman connection” by Levitz and Noel (1989), involves numerous factors that can essentially be grouped into three diverse yet interrelated components: (1) transitioning to college and understanding expectations, (2) relating to the environment, and (3) academic success and working towards career goals. Each of these elements, which will be discussed below, can be positively influenced by informal faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom.

Transitioning to College and Understanding Expectations.
The most influential period during the freshman year occurs during the first six weeks as students are transitioning to life at college (Levitz & Noel, 1989). This period of adjustment can be very important to retention, especially for students who are having difficulties integrating into the institutional environment. In his study on the effects of participating in a mentoring-transcript program, Cosgrove (1986) examined the level of satisfaction and normative congruence of students who were matched with a volunteer faculty or professional staff mentor at the beginning of their freshman year. All mentors attended a two-hour training session and typically met with mentees an average of three times during the year to discuss academic concerns and choice of extracurricular activities. In analyzing the questionnaires of students who participated in this program, Cosgrove determined that 94% of them found the program beneficial. He also reported that 76% of the students described reflecting on at least two predefined developmental areas (out of ten) found to be significant in student persistence that they would not have reflected on had they not participated in the program. Chickering and Reisser (1993) contended that a large portion of developing competency involves awareness of and reflection on the self’s thoughts, actions and emotions. This consciousness of the self, as demonstrated by the students in the mentoring-transcript program, leads to a greater “self-concept,” which Chickering and Reisser argued “must be developed in order to connect with a broader range of cohorts and to find common ground based on inner character versus outward appearance” (p. 81).

Informal faculty-student interactions are further important in assisting students’ transition to college by helping them to understand the faculty and the academic expectations being placed on them as first-year students. Pascarella (1975) noted that students tended to be more honest and open with faculty in informal settings because it provided a less threatening situation for their relationship to develop. This, in turn, resulted in faculty developing a more substantial understanding of their students’ capabilities and allowed them to better define appropriate expectations to be placed on students. As Astin (1984) stated, the physical and psychological time a student has to commit to a specific activity is a finite resource. Faculty members, in the pursuit of enhancing educational development and academic achievement, must compete with a student’s family, friends, jobs and outside activities for that student’s energy and involvement. By interacting with students in an informal setting, faculty members are better able to recognize the potential of their students and place expectations on them that are challenging without being overwhelming or discouraging.
Relating to the Environment.
Another important element of freshman persistence and academic achievement is the manner in which students relate to faculty and how this influences their connection to the institutional environment. In their study of faculty-student interactions beyond the classroom, Wilson, Woods, and Gaff (1974) reasoned that the largest factor affecting these interactions was faculty “social-psychological accessibility.” This is defined as “faculty beliefs and attitudes, which support a view of education as an interactive process and faculty behaviors which appear to invite discussion both within and beyond the classroom” (p. 81). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Hibel (1978), in a study on faculty-student interactional settings, confirmed the significance of faculty social-psychological accessibility while adding that institutional structuring that increases students’ likelihood of interacting with faculty informally (e.g., faculty-in-residence programs) is essential to student retention efforts.

Additionally, Cosgrove (1986) found that students who received mentors during their first-year often turned to these mentors for assistance in selecting extracurricular activities for fear of over commitment at the expense of academic pursuits. This type of judicious evaluation by the student indicates, once again, an awareness of the self and its limitations defined by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as an indicator of development and institutional integration. Moreover, the expressed interest in extracurricular activities and, as a result, the institutional environment, implies a desire for social integration and satisfaction.

Academic Success and Working toward Career Goals.
Numerous studies demonstrate the importance of informal faculty-student interactions in influencing students’ academic achievements, career aspirations and persistence (Johnson, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Thistlethwaite & Wheeler, 1966; Wilson & Gaff, 1975). In their study on the effects of faculty-student interactions, Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) determined which types of interactions were most effective in encouraging student involvement and integration. Asking students to rate how often and why they interacted with faculty outside of the classroom and grouping these responses into six distinct categories, Pascarella and Terenzini established that students were most positively influenced by interactions that focused on intellectual and course-related materials or career concerns. Interactions with faculty that centered on a campus issue or that served as a means of informal socialization were of the least concern to students. More importantly, student access to faculty to informally discuss academic and course-related interests also led to positive academic achievements and institutional commitment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Wilson, Woods, & Gaff, 1974). Centra and Rock (1971) found in their study of student achievement that students with a high level of interaction with faculty achieved better than expected (based on GPA and aptitude testing) on the GRE Humanities, Science, and Social Science tests.

Faculty-student interactions have also been shown to increase a student’s likelihood of setting and achieving career goals beyond college. In their study on teacher and peer subcultures, Thistlethwaite and Wheeler (1966) discovered that
students who interacted informally with faculty developed a stronger desire to graduate, as well as an increased probability of attending graduate school. This is because students who develop close, mentoring relationships with faculty members frequently become more motivated to perform well academically and develop more ambitious career goals that often include graduate school. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) also found that informal interactions with faculty could encourage students with low institutional or goal commitment to persist at their present institution.

The Role of Faculty

While it has been established that informal faculty-student interactions are extremely beneficial in the development and persistence of first-year students, these interactions also play a role in developing positive faculty attitudes and greatly benefit the institution as a whole. Wilson, Woods, and Gaff (1974) found that faculty who interact more frequently with students outside of the classroom develop an enhanced sense of enjoyment and accomplishment in teaching. Faculty also gain an increased “knowledge of students’ academic strengths and weaknesses in areas of core concerns in the liberal arts education” (p. 90).

More important, however, is a faculty member’s accessibility to students. As stated in Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1976) study of informal interaction between faculty and students, students who desire interaction with faculty can become severely dissatisfied or frustrated with an institution “if that contact is denied or obstructed—whether by the personal inclinations of faculty members or because of a faculty reward system which fails to recognize the potential educational value of faculty contact with students beyond the classroom” (p. 40). Students’ access to faculty goes beyond faculty simply holding regular office hours and is manifested in the faculty member’s teaching style and how he or she interacts with students in the classroom (Wilson, Woods, & Gaff, 1974). Vreeland and Bidwell (1966) found that a faculty member’s attitude towards students was much more relevant to the concept of accessibility than simply being physically available.

As a final note regarding the role faculty play, it has been found that students only need three or four informal meetings with faculty per academic year to develop a relationship that positively influences the student academically and socially (Cosgrove, 1986; Wilson, Woods, & Gaff, 1974). This finding challenges the notion often presented that, given their other institutional commitments to teaching, advisement, and research, faculty do not have adequate time to devote to informally nurturing students’ development (Vreeland & Bidwell, 1966).

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

In reviewing the research available on informal faculty-student interactions outside of the classroom, the significant role these interactions play in affecting student satisfaction and persistence becomes readily apparent. For this reason, higher education institutions need to recognize the importance of informal faculty-
student interactions and strive to encourage and reward faculty who engage in these types of exchanges with their students. Moreover, these informal interactions also benefit faculty by fostering in them a better understanding of their students’ goals and abilities, and an increased satisfaction in their role as an educator. It can be argued that if student affairs practitioners are able to successfully create an environment in which informal faculty-student interactions are valued and sought out by both faculty and students, the satisfaction that both of these groups experience with regards to the institution will almost indefinitely increase.

Therefore, it is vital that student affairs practitioners work to develop programming and retention initiatives that encourage faculty to interact with students in more informal settings. While the exploration of this type of programming warrants its own discussion, some examples of programming currently in place at higher education institutions include faculty-in-residence programs, which place faculty in residence halls; faculty mentor programs, which match students with faculty members based on a shared academic interest; and faculty participation in freshman orientation programming, which may include faculty speaking with incoming students about their academic expectations and goals. Student affairs practitioners, by encouraging and providing first-year students with opportunities to interact informally with faculty, ease these students’ sometimes difficult transition to college and afford them a greater likelihood of satisfaction and persistence at their present institution.
References


Higher Education Administration Program at New York University

The faculty in Higher Education is dedicated to providing high quality advanced graduate study for students working in or seeking to understand issues related to urban and international higher education. The Higher Education Administration Program offers doctoral degrees concentrating on university administration, urban college and community college leadership, global higher education, and higher education policy as well as a master's degree in student personnel administration. Issues and problems regarding urban higher education hold a particular focus for the program.

Program Description

The Program in Higher Education Administration prepares individuals for leadership and service in a variety of post secondary settings. The Master of Arts Program focuses on entry- and mid-level positions in enrollment management, financial aid, housing and residence life, student life, career services, and similar opportunities in student affairs. In the Doctoral Programs, individuals develop competencies in such areas as urban college leadership, policy analysis, student affairs, institutional research, fiscal management, and international higher education. Students benefit from strong links with two- and four-year institutions in the metropolitan New York area as well as the frequent and close interaction among students, faculty, and NYU administrators.

For more information visit http://education.nyu.edu/alt/highered/
New York University
Division of Student Affairs

The mission of the Division of Student Affairs is twofold: 1) to complement and support the University’s academic mission as an international center for scholarship, teaching, and research, and 2) to enhance the quality of life for students both in and outside the classroom. We are guided in our endeavors by a set of core principles. These are to provide students with a superior educational experience and to create an environment that fosters community, welcomes diversity in all its forms, values integrity, promotes overall well-being, and exemplifies high quality service.

We view the purpose of a college education and our role in it broadly to include not only the cognitive and intellectual growth of our students but also their personal, social, and moral development as well. This also means encouraging and enabling students to realize their personal potential, providing them with a platform on which to build professional lives, and preparing them for responsible citizenship. We seek to engage students in this process collaboratively as active participants.

Within this framework, we provide a wide array of co-curricular programs and services that offer students opportunities to be involved in college life, give general and specialized support and guidance, and collaborate with academic and other administrative units in mutual support of these goals.

For more information visit http://www.nyu.edu/student.affairs/
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Authors of selected abstracts will be requested to submit a first draft in order to be considered for publication.

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° Double-space all material, including references, quotations, tables, and figures. Leave extra space above and below subheadings and allow generous margins (at least one inch margins).
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Research manuscripts should total no more than twelve (12) double-spaced, typewritten pages (approximately 2,500 words) including references, figures, and tables. Shorter articles are accepted and encouraged.

Original research (literary, qualitative, or quantitative) is encouraged. All such work should be applicable to the higher education and student affairs professions.

Field reports should not exceed three (3) pages (approximately 600 words in length). They should briefly report on or describe new practices, programs, or techniques.

Dialogues and interviews should follow the manuscript guidelines outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fifth Edition (2001). They should take the form of verbatim exchange, oral or written, between two or more people.

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Manuscripts that have been previously published or are currently under consideration for publication should NEVER be submitted.

Each submission should include the original (typed on 8 1/2” x 11” paper) and three copies of all material. Material may also be submitted electronically; contact The Student Affairs Journal of NYU at highered.journal@nyu.edu for more information.

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