The Effects of Informal Faculty-Student Interactions on Academic and Social Integration in First-Year Students

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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


