

The importance of faculty-student contact outside the classroom.

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Literature Review

In this literature review, you will find research indicating that faculty-student contact outside the classroom is empirically associated with students':

- (1) retention/persistence to graduation
- (2) academic achievement/performance
- (3) critical thinking
- (4) personal and intellectual development
- (5) educational aspirations
- (6) satisfaction with faculty
- (7) college satisfaction and
- (8) perceptions of college quality.

Positive outcomes associated with faculty-student contact outside the classroom have been reported for students of all types, including transfer students, female students, African-American students, and "at-risk" students (e.g., economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students). Furthermore, the positive effects of student contact with faculty outside of class has been found to have a direct effect on educational outcomes that is independent of other college experiences and student characteristics. Thus, its association with positive outcomes cannot be simply dismissed as being caused by the tendency of already high-achieving students to engage in more frequent out-of-class contact with faculty.

In short, the body of research supporting faculty-student contact outside the classroom is formidable and the positive outcomes empirically associated with it are multiple. One would be hard-pressed to find any other college-experience variable with as much empirical support for as many positive educational outcomes. As I interpret the current literature, the issue is not whether such contact is beneficial, but how it can be promoted. Toward this end, the attached manuscript concludes with a sample of intentional strategies for promoting faculty-student contact outside the classroom.

When first reviewing this literature, I was taken by total surprise, because I always thought it was what I did in the classroom that mattered most. Then I remembered a couple of personal interactions I had with students outside the classroom that made me begin to realize why the results on out-of-class contact with students were so powerful and, perhaps, not so surprising. The first incident occurred when I was teaching part-time while completing my dissertation. My soon-to-be wife and I went to a club/bar to hear one of my favourite blues artists (a favourite pastime of mine). I ran into a student at the joint and she was just incredulous; she simply could not

believe that I was there. In fact, she kept repeating, "I can't believe that you're here." As I think back, her incredulity probably stemmed from her belief that college professors were not real people who could have some fun and may sometimes have similar interests as students. It dawned on me that her preconception of a college professor was someone who professes all the time, and that even on a Saturday night, I'd be home grading papers and reading journals-and that I probably was doing so since the foetal stage of development.

The second incident occurred after I had completed my graduate work and was a first-year, full-time faculty member. A colleague of mine in Student Affairs asked if I'd play in a student-faculty softball game. Since playing baseball was a lifelong recreational activity for me, I was happy to be asked to play. During the week following the game, I had unsolicited office visits from five students who participated in that game (3 male and 2 female). During those office visits, our conversation did not just revolve around the ball game, but included such topics as classes, majors, careers, current events, and personal issues. Four of those five students continued to visit me periodically until they graduated, and two of them became my academic advisees. Clearly, that one student-faculty softball game had signalled my approachability to these students and positioned me to influence their academic and personal development.

While there is a substantial amount of empirical research indicating that faculty-student contact outside the classroom is powerful, there has been comparatively little discussion of why this experience has proven to be so powerful. Here are some of my hypotheses about why faculty-student contact outside the classroom has such high impact:

- It occurs in a less formal context than the classroom, so a student may feel less threatened or intimidated about discussing his or her ideas.
- The faculty member is more likely to be seen as a real "person" who can be emulated, instead of a professorial pedagogue (or demigod) who should be revered.
- Faculty-student verbal interaction is more conversational or dialogic and less didactic or prescriptive.
- It is an individualized person-to-person interaction, where the faculty/student ratio is 1:1-an idea social context for learning.
- The student is able gain some control of the agenda and the topics discussed, in contrast to the classroom where the instructor dominates the agenda and the flow of conversation.
- Ideas are exchanged for reasons that are non-evaluative and more intrinsically motivated, in contrast to ideas exchanged in the classroom where the student is responsible for those ideas, because s/he will be evaluated (graded) for comprehension of them.

The second line of research and scholarship that may be taken as evidence in support of faculty involvement in orientation relates to the principle of "front-loading," i.e., the reallocation of faculty and other institutional resources to better serve entering students. This was the first recommendation cited in an influential report issued by the National Institute of Education Study Group (1984) on the status of American higher education. It has become almost axiomatic that delivery of student-support

programming should be proactive, thereby ensuring that support reaches student at the time they need it the most-when they are most vulnerable to attrition-and when support is most likely to have its greatest long-term impact.

New-student orientation is a proactive support program, which has its most salutary effects on student retention when it effectively promotes students' social integration or interaction with other members of the college community. In what may be the most methodologically rigorous study of the impact of new-student orientation programs, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle (1986) controlled for a host of factors, such as students' college-entry test scores, secondary school grades, socioeconomic status, pre-college educational aspirations, and commitment to the college they were attending. While controlling for these potentially confounding variables, they found that orientation did not have a statistically insignificant direct effect on student persistence. However, orientation programs did have a statistically significant indirect effect on student persistence when they promoted first-year students' social integration and subsequent commitment to the institution, because the latter two variables did have positive, statistically significant effects on student persistence. In other words, orientation programs that had a positive effect on student retention were those that promoted students' social integration-through which the orientation's positive effect on retention was mediated. This research suggests that what matters most in new-student orientation is not information dissemination or orientation to offices and buildings, but social integration and interaction with people. As Tinto (1993) notes, "Orientation programs frequently fail to provide information in a form which leads new students to establish personal contacts. That is, they often fail to recognize the fact that students' ability and willingness to obtain much-needed information during the course of their academic careers depend upon their having established personal, non-threatening contacts with the persons who provide that information. The key to effective orientation programs, indeed to effective retention programs generally [is] that they go beyond the provision of information per se to the establishment of early contacts for new students" (p. 159).

The importance of early contacts with faculty, in particular, for promoting student retention is supported by the first comprehensive review of student retention research, conducted by Pantages and Creedon (1978). On the basis of their review of 25 years of research, they concluded that one potentially potent approach to reducing student attrition was for colleges to find ways to maximize faculty-student interaction during the first year, including greater faculty involvement in new-student orientation. The value of student-faculty contact during orientation for promoting academic achievement is supported by research conducted by Pascarella, Terenzini, and Hibel (1978), who examined different types of faculty contact on the academic achievement of approximately 500 students. The results of this study led the authors to conclude that, "the first few informal interactions with faculty appear to be the most important" (p. 457). This finding is consistent with reported evidence indicating that orientation programs in which faculty participate have a favourable impact on the intellectual development of students (Moore, Peterson & Wirag, 1984).

When research on the positive impact of early faculty-student contact is juxtaposed with the copious research on the positive impact on faculty-student contact outside the classroom in general, I think that you can make a strong empirical case for the importance of faculty involvement in student orientation.

References

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