Faculty and Student Relationships: Context Matters

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As many as 42% of first and second year students at post-secondary institutions fail to complete their degrees, and of those students, only 15–25% of them drop out due to poor academic performance or for financial reasons. The remainder of them leave college for reasons that are less clear (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). However, positive relationships with key players, including faculty, at colleges and universities have been clearly associated with college persistence and completion.

This article is an examination of student-faculty relationships at four-year colleges and universities and the contexts in which their interactions occur. Characteristics of positive relationships are discussed along with descriptions of student and faculty perceptions of the significance of the different contexts in which they interact.

Keywords: college student attrition, college student retention, relational context, student/ faculty relationships

The most recent statistics on post-secondary graduation rates indicate that only slightly more than half of students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities complete a degree within six years of matriculation (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Reasons for student failure to graduate with a degree are varied, ranging from dismissal for below standard academic progress to financial concerns. Other students abandon their pursuit of a college degree for reasons that are less clear, but may be associated with a poor academic self-concept, a lack of motivation (Komorraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya 2010) and minimal social integration and adjustment (Cox et al. 2010). Many colleges and universities are looking closely at factors that impact a student's inclination to complete a post-secondary education. One such factor may be related to the relationships between students and faculty.

Positive student-faculty interactions have long been associated with positive outcomes for students, including increased effort, greater student engagement, a higher level of content acquisition (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), and a greater likelihood of persistence and subsequent college completion. Student involvement with faculty in research projects and other aspects of the academic community contributes to academic achievement as well as psychosocial growth and development (Komorraju et al. 2010). Faculty availability and accessibility contributes to not only student intellectual development, but also to setting educational goals and subsequent goal attainment, changes in attitudes, and orientation toward more scholarly careers (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

It is widely understood that one of the primary roles of the college professor is focused on curriculum design, instruction, content delivery, and student academic progress, and that this type of academic interaction between instructor and student occurs primarily within the classroom. Academic interactions taking place before, during, or just after class time are often more formal in nature, usually referring specifically to course content or assignments. However, student interactions with college and university faculty may also take a less formal posture, with interactions potentially occurring before or after class, in hallways and faculty offices, at other campus sites, off campus, and via digital communication.

The purpose of this paper is to review current literature examining student-faculty relationships and the contexts in which they occur. A synthesis of the literature describing such relationships highlights potential benefits available to students and faculty as a result of the nature of the relationships they share with each other. An examination of current research on academic interactions between students and faculty precedes a discussion of more informal or casual interactions between them. Recent advances in technology provide additional avenues for informal exchanges, including email and social media, which may, depending on their use, also impact the quality of their relationships.

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METHODS

The focus of this review is on the effects of various contexts on interactions between undergraduate students and faculty within the framework of a four-year college or university. A broad research base exists examining relational variations due to race, graduate student status, residency status, and relationships that occur in other types of institutions such as community colleges. These studies were omitted to hone in on the types of interactions that occur between students and faculty and the contexts in which their interactions occur, including interactions occurring in a digital environment.

The literature in this review was collected from a variety of sources. Initially, an electronic search was conducted using the JSTOR, EBSCO, AcademicOneFile, EducationResearchComplete, and Google Scholar databases. Key search terms included *faculty/student relationships, college student/faculty interactions, faculty/student interactions, faculty use of email, out of class communication*, and *faculty/student communication*. All of the articles selected focused on relationships between faculty and students in higher education, and included an examination of the nature and the context of the relationships shared between faculty and students. In addition, the majority of the selected articles were published within the last 10 years in peer-reviewed journals, with the exception of frequently cited foundational articles by Tinto (1975, 1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1977, 1980), among other notable authors. Articles published within the last 10 years were deemed more reflective of current college and university faculty and students, especially as they related to the use of technology in supporting their relationships. A criterion for inclusion of the older articles was that each was cited multiple times in more recent journal articles. From references listed in the initial set of articles, an ancestral search was conducted and additional articles were located, yielding a total of 44 relevant articles.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The importance of the student/teacher relationship has been acknowledged for centuries. Greek philosopher, Plato, some 400 years before Christ suggested that the relationship between teacher and student is essential to teaching and must be firmly established before learning can occur. Rather than regarding the teacher as someone who does something *to* someone, as in pouring knowledge into an empty vessel, in Plato's view, the teacher is someone who does something *with* someone, as in equal participation in the acquisition of knowledge (McEwan 2011). Other notable educational philosophers and researchers such as Nel Noddings (2005), Robert Pianta (1994), and Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) continue to offer support for the importance of positive relational qualities that enhance the act of learning. Such qualities include, but are not limited to, an open relationship, a relaxed and supportive environment, respect, positive rapport, and a safe and nonthreatening classroom (Anderson and Carta-Falsa 2002).

The potential benefits of positive student/faculty interactions are many. Studies have shown that engagement with faculty can enhance student academic achievement, intellectual growth, personal development, and college or university persistence (Halawah 2006). In addition, the presence of a caring relationship between students and faculty has been associated with greater student growth and development (Goldstein 1999). Conversely, the failure of faculty to demonstrate caring and respectful behaviors suggests to students that faculty members have given up on them and their learning, and often results in diminished self-esteem, disengagement from classroom activity, and possible failure to complete the course (Hawk and Lyons 2008).

Despite indications of positive outcomes for students who engage in positive relationships with faculty, such relationships may be becoming increasingly infrequent. It has been theorized that institutional pressure to engage in scholarly activity has created a climate in which faculty feel obliged to limit their engagement in student-faculty relationships in favor of conducting research. Time demands resulting from a focus on promotion and tenure, especially for junior faculty, could limit their availability for otherwise non-obligatory engagement with students. However, results are mixed in research studies investigating the correlation between time constraints and willingness to engage in relationships with students (Einarson and Clarkberg 2004). Einarson and Clarkberg (2004) suggest that there are four primary reasons for faculty unwillingness to participate in relationships with students outside of the classroom environment: lack of time, few institutional rewards for building and supporting relationships, differing values and core beliefs about teaching as opposed to research, and faculty feelings of competence in building relationships with students.

Despite a myriad of on-campus support systems, including freshman seminar courses, intensive freshman orientation programs, and student mentoring programs, student attrition, especially in the first two years of enrollment, hovers around 42% (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Of the students who fail to complete a degree, 15–25% of them are dismissed due to academic performance issues or they withdraw for financial reasons, with the remaining student attrition due to a variety of factors, one of which may be related to the quality of relationships between students and faculty members on campus (Lillis 2011, Tinto 1975; Tinto 1993). Tinto (1975) suggests that colleges and universities comprise two primary domains: the obvious academic sphere, and of equal importance, the social domain. Successful navigation through higher education requires successful integration into both domains. Positive interactions with faculty can be

conducive to successful navigation in not only the academic realm, but also the social domain.

ACADEMIC INTERACTIONS

Interactions between faculty and students in the classroom setting are typically more academic in nature, but still may be suggestive of relational qualities that students and faculty share. By its very nature, cognitive growth is a function of a relationship—it happens as the result of an understanding that occurs between people, and is not associated with just one person or the other (Rogoff 1990). Connected relationships between students and faculty in the classroom have been closely associated with positive achievement attitudes, including student self-efficacy and student satisfaction (Creasey, Jarvis, and Knapcik 2009). A recent survey of student beliefs and attitudes regarding their professors' behavior in the classroom suggests that in addition to a professor's comprehensive knowledge of the content area, being treated respectfully and compassionately, demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject matter and the instructor's availability for discussions were important attributes for constructive relationships with faculty (Helterbran 2008).

OUT OF CLASS INTERACTIONS

Student/faculty interactions of a more academic nature take place primarily within the classroom, but for many students, visiting a professor's office or other informal contact outside of the classroom presents opportunities to clarify concepts and ideas from class discussions and readings. Informal discussions with faculty outside of the classroom have been associated with increased motivation, greater academic self-confidence (Komorraju et al. 2010), and a heightened sense of purpose (Martin 2000). Students who frequently participate in informal academic conversations with a faculty member, report feeling confident about their academic abilities and better prepared for the job market (Komorraju et al. 2010). A recent study of the relationship between particularly challenging course content and the types of interactions between students and faculty found a positive correlation between supportive interactions with students and student academic self-confidence and motivation, and a negative correlation between such interactions and high levels of anxiety and concern over grades and assignments (Micari and Pazos 2012).

Students value learning additional course content in this type of setting, but also appreciate the potential for learning beyond the realm of the subject matter (Helterbran 2008). Professors who are perceived as approachable and caring make themselves available for conversations outside of their academic role, focus on life lessons, and are more willing to answer questions (Hong and Shull 2010). Participation in this type of exchange has been associated with increased student

motivation, greater levels of enthusiasm toward their field of study, and students are more likely to enjoy the learning process (Komorraju et al. 2010).

For other students, however, an appearance in their professor's office may not be even a remote possibility. As many as one third of undergraduates indicate that they have little or no significant contact with their professors outside of the classroom (Snow 1973; Kuh and Hu 2001). In some cases, students are unable to identify a good reason to engage with faculty, and in other cases, students are unsure as to whether or not it is appropriate for them to do so (Cotton and Wilson 2006).

CASUAL OR INFORMAL INTERACTIONS

Despite demonstrated benefits available for students, interactions with faculty outside of the classroom remain somewhat infrequent occurrences (Cox et al. 2010). Their frequency is affected not only by the student's inclination to engage with a professor outside of class, but also the professor's commitment to do so. Institutional pressures for service to departments, universities, and the profession, to engage in scholarly activity, and to maintain a high level of teaching can impact the amount of time a faculty member has to afford a student. Especially in the case of junior faculty, such pressures can take precedence over allotting time for more casual encounters with students. However, a recent study of faculty out of class interactions with students suggested that in spite of institutional pressure to publish or perish many faculty find personal and professional rewards in working with undergraduates on research projects or other out of class activities (Einarson and Clarkberg 2004).

Interactions between students and faculty outside of the academic sphere can be either positive or negative. Ei and Bowen (2002) found that students valued some, but not all, interactions with faculty outside of the classroom. Functional interactions related to course content or discipline specific material were cited as being most important (Cox and Orehovec 2007; Ei and Bowen 2002). Contact with faculty involving group activities and business relationships were also cited as positive interactions. The frequency and type of interactions preferred by students have been shown to vary among different student groups. Individual student characteristics, including racial or cultural backgrounds and gender, were shown to influence contact with faculty outside of the classroom, although the potential benefits of their interactions with faculty remained constant (Ei and Bowen 2002).

When a relationship between student and professor extends beyond the primary professional relationship, the potential for negative effects increases as professional boundaries are crossed (Owen and Zwahr-Castro 2007). The relationship between a student and a professor inherently includes an imbalance of power, and relationships that extend beyond the realm of typical student-faculty interactions could

result in diminished objectivity and exploitation (Owen and Zwahr-Castro 2007; Rupert and Holmes 1997). Most colleges and universities have publicized policies against sexual harassment and sexual relationships between student and faculty. There are, however, fewer policies defining parameters of relationships between students and faculty in areas such as business relationships or friendships, and the boundaries that do exist are much less clear. Crossing some boundaries of the student-faculty relationship may initially appear to be of benefit to the student, but may in fact be detrimental. For example, a professor may provide employment to a student who needs financial support, or may extend their friendship by inviting a student to their home for dinner. Both situations appear on the surface to benefit the student, yet both situations have the potential to exploit or otherwise cause harm to the student. In the case of providing employment, the student may feel pressure to accept the offer of employment despite time constraints, or the availability of other, more lucrative employment. The student who is invited to dinner may feel pressure to accept the invitation, despite the need to study or engage in other opportunities on campus (Rupert and Holmes 1997).

Some types of interactions with faculty outside of the classroom were cited by students as being generally unacceptable. Students indicated that time alone with faculty members was inappropriate, especially involving interactions of a sexual nature (Ei 2002). In addition, socializing with faculty in a bar or at a campus party, and participating in certain types of financial transactions were also cited by students as boundaries that should not be crossed (Owen and Zwahr-Castro 2007).

CASUAL INTERACTIONS THROUGH DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

An additional means of engagement between students and faculty is through the use of digital communication, including email and various social media. Today's college students have grown up using technology for entertainment, research, and communication, in many cases, to a much greater extent than their professors. Sometimes referred to as digital natives (Prensky 2006), these students understand technology as a routine part of their daily lives (Evans & Forbes 2012), and as an efficient and highly appropriate means of communication with faculty.

E-mail

The use of email as a means of communication between faculty and students has clearly been shown to benefit both groups. Several studies have demonstrated positive effects from the use of email to supplement teaching as well as to improve the frequency and quality of student-faculty interactions (Atamian & Demoville 1998; Duran, Kelly, and Keaton 2005; Hassini 2006; Sheer and Fung 2007). Many students have indicated that the use of email has enabled them to express thoughts and ideas to their professors that they would not have been able to express publicly during class (Jones 2002). For some students who may be shy or have reticence challenges, email provides an avenue for communication that may not otherwise be available to them (Kelly, Duran, and Zolten 2001). Students who may be uncomfortable communicating in class have the option to communicate with their professors via email, and although one study indicated that they do not in fact send emails to their professors more frequently than their peers, they did indicate a preference for doing so rather than speaking out in class. Email affords them the option for a level of communication that is on par with their non-reticent peers, and provides additional opportunities to foster positive relationships with their professors. Without email, the frequency of their interactions with faculty suffers (Kelly, Duran, and Zolten 2001).

Students report that their emails tend to fall into one of four categories: reporting absences, clarification of assignments, discussion of grades, or making appointments (Jones 2002) although faculty perceptions differ slightly. Faculty members perceive that emails from students offer both positive and negative consequences. From a positive perspective, students send emails to support and augment their learning. However, student emails that offer excuses for not attending class, not turning in assignments, or other actions that may impede their learning are received in a more negative light (Duran, Kelly, and Keaton 2005).

From a teaching perspective, email is typically used on an individual basis to clarify specific points from classroom discussions and assignments or may be included as a routine method of participation in course related discussions or group projects. Faculty members often post assignments, answer student questions, and engage in other course administrative duties. Less frequently, professors engage students in more social topics, such as hobbies and extracurricular activities, as a means of self-disclosure (Sheer and Fung 2007).

Faculty office hours provide additional opportunities for student faculty interaction outside of the classroom, yet studies have shown that students seldom take advantage of them. Student visits during office hours, when they do occur, are typically somewhat hurried and focused on a specific issue (Kuh and Hu 2001; Li and Pitts 2001). Although most colleges and universities require a certain number of office hours of faculty each week, some have elected to maintain virtual office hours, conducted via email (Atamian and Demoville 1998; Li and Pitts 2001). One study examining the use of computer technology as an integral learning tool in a course required that all communication with the instructor outside of the classroom took place using email. Students submitted all work via email, and the professor provided all explanations of assignments and projects in the same fashion. Student emails were acknowledged and answered within a few hours

of their posting. Researchers determined that, in general, students appreciated the use of email for its efficiency, although for some students, the lack of access to computer technology was problematic at times (Atamian and Demoville 1998).

Email communication between students and faculty is not without potential downsides. Although students value the security of being able to interact with their professors via email whenever the need arises, for some faculty, responding to a barrage of student emails can become a significant time commitment. In addition, the line between the demands of work and home become blurred with the constant need to respond to emails, infringing on what should be the professor's free time. One study of faculty perceptions of student use of email to communicate with them found that each faculty member typically receives about 15 emails a week from students, but they may only respond to as few as seven of them (Duran, Kelly, and Keaton 2005) simply due to a lack of time. Each email usually requires an individual response, and individually crafted responses take time. In addition, faculty indicated that most of their emails come from a small percentage of their students. Responding to their emails may strengthen the relationships the faculty shares with a small number of students, but it may do little to engage the majority of the students in their classes. Another study of email communications between students and faculty suggests that faculty maintain expectations for a certain level of formality in the emails they receive from students. When those expectations are met with overly casual emails, students are at risk of losing credibility and respect from their professors (Stephens, Houser, and Cowan 2009).

Social Media

Numerous social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have made their way into mainstream educational contexts. They provide a means for faculty to disseminate information, conduct focus groups, and engage in discussions relative to course content. Despite their increasing use, however, findings are mixed in assessing student and faculty perceptions of the use of social media. One recent study indicated that although faculty are more interested than students in using social media in a course delivery and engagement context, faculty remain generally disinterested in doing so, with the possible exception of its use in distance education (Settle et al. 2012).

Some students have been shown to be even less interested than their professors in connecting via social media. Despite the fact that students usually prefer live learning environments over online coursework or distance education, students who have previous experience with these types of learning environments may be more receptive to them than those without previous experience. College students typically have extensive experience with social media, but their experiences are predominantly more social in nature. Using Facebook or Twitter as classroom tools may simply require

experience in order to make them more acceptable to students (Settle et al. 2012).

Faculty use of Facebook and other social networking sites includes a certain level of self-disclosure which contributes to student perceptions of individual faculty. A study of student responses to varying levels of faculty self-disclosure on Facebook indicated that most students appreciated the opportunity to know more about their professor, although results further suggested that the possibility of too much information was damaging to the professor's credibility and overall professionalism (Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 2007). In contrast, an additional study found that a relatively high percentage of both students and faculty believe that social networking sites such as Facebook should be off limits for faculty, even for personal accounts. Students felt that having their professors on Facebook violated what they consider to be a faculty-free zone, an opinion often shared by faculty. Students flatly rejected situations in which faculty used Facebook to gather additional information about students, but they appreciated faculty involvement when students could gain advantage from their interactions (Malesky and Peters 2012).

The successful inclusion of Facebook and other social media in the educational environment requires an awareness of social knowledge, including morality, conventional issues and personal matters. Facial cues, and other non-verbal forms of expression are absent in exchanges occurring via social media, necessitating particular attention to the content of postings, responses and other digital behaviors. In particular, faculty participation in digital communication involving moral issues and personal matters have been found to be highly inappropriate and objectionable by students, but faculty participation in more conventional issues has been shown to be more acceptable to them (Nemetz 2010). This suggests that it may be beneficial to faculty-student relationships to maintain separate sites for course use only in which accessibility of contents is limited to those enrolled in the course and the contents are primarily related to the course. In addition, using privacy settings in other forums may prevent over-exposure to more personal or moral postings for both faculty and students.

DISCUSSION

The preponderance of the literature on student-faculty interactions shows that frequent, positive exchanges with faculty are clearly beneficial for a number of different student outcomes including student motivation and academic success, college persistence, and development of career building skills (Anderson and Carta-Falsa 2002; Cotton and Wilson 2006; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). The contexts in which interactions between students and faculty occur have a significant impact on the type of relationships developing between them; interactions occurring in the classroom or those that take place before or immediately after class tend to be more

academic in nature while those that occur in environments outside of the classroom tend to include a more intimate sharing of personal characteristics.

Navigating the landscape of relationships shared between students and faculty is replete with challenges. Boundaries, real and imagined, are firmly established in the personalities and expectations of both student and professor. Some students may be reluctant to engage with a faculty member in the classroom, but may be more willing to do so in a digital environment. They may approve of a certain amount of disclosure by their professors, but have limits to their interest and acceptance of personal details. Students may feel that they are being spied upon when a faculty member attempts to make himself available through social media, but may approve of such contact when they perceive that there are advantages to be gained from that contact.

Professors share the need for boundaries as well. They may feel that student interactions impede their efforts to engage in service or scholarly behavior, a requirement of the promotion and tenure process. Their personalities may preclude satisfying relationships with students outside of the academic environment. The age and power differential between faculty and students may blur the limits of the relationships they share with students, making mutually rewarding relationships difficult, if not impossible. Constant efforts by students to interact with faculty, especially outside of class, have the potential to become disruptive and time consuming.

Despite the fact that both faculty and students need boundaries in their relationships, the responsibility for creating and maintaining relational boundaries falls on the instructor. Relationships between students and faculty are based on the premise that the student seeks guidance and support, with the full expectation of being able to trust the instructor to behave appropriately and not abuse the power differential between them (Wilson, Smalley, and Yancey 2012). Because the imbalance in power between faculty and student exists, it is the instructor's responsibility to prevent a potentially exploitative relationship.

In spite of the difficulties inherent in the student-faculty relationship, the potential for student benefit is significant and should be supported. A steadfast focus on student academic success requires that faculty engage in positive and supportive relationships in academic contexts, especially in the classroom. Faculty should maintain regular office hours, either face-to-face or in a digital environment in order to make themselves available to answer questions, clarify concepts, explain assignments, or simply to extend learning. Opportunities for out of class contact should be provided, and students should be encouraged to take advantage of them. For students who struggle with public communication, more private conversations, either in person or via digital communication may allow the student to gain a similar advantage to that of their more vociferous peers who may be more willing to participate in classroom discussions.

In conclusion, because the responsibility to support positive relationships with students lies with the instructor, instructors should attend to relationship building opportunities afforded them by the various contexts in which they engage with their students. It is especially important to provide a variety of contexts that build on student strengths and needs, and to ensure that students recognize their instructor's efforts to support them.

Directions for future study

The benefits available to students as a result of their engagement with faculty have been thoroughly examined, but missing from the literature is the faculty perspective on benefits available to them from their relationships with students. Potential reciprocal benefits for faculty may include increased awareness of student perspectives regarding the nature of the courses they teach, facilitating more effective teaching, a clearer understanding of student interest in participating in additional learning opportunities such as research projects with faculty, and an appreciation of student expectations for the kinds of relationships with faulty that they choose to engage in. Because these relational attributes remain somewhat ambiguous and not clearly defined, clarifying their roles and responsibilities in supporting their relationships with students may allow faculty to focus less on their relationships with students and more on whatever they perceive their primary functions in the college or university to be.

An additional focus should be turned to relational expectations of students and faculty across colleges and/or major departments. It is possible that the expectations of students and faculty in different departments differ significantly from one another, and that those differences require diverse behaviors to support relationships between faculty and students. Variations in student expectations for their relationships with faculty across departments could suggest that alternative faculty behaviors may be warranted in certain situations. Students may enter a relationship with an instructor with a predisposition to interact with him strictly in an academic realm, or they may be predisposed to engage in a variety of opportunities for interaction, and faculty would benefit from a clearer understanding of the requirements of their role in establishing positive relationships with their students.

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