Faculty-Student Interaction Outside of Class: A Typology from a Residential College

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Abstract
Faculty-student interaction is an important component of the undergraduate experience. Our year-long qualitative study explored the complex nature of faculty-student interaction outside of class. Our resulting typology identifies five types of interaction: Disengagement, Incidental Contact, Functional Interaction, Personal Interaction, and Mentoring. The typology provides researchers a new lens through which they can examine faculty-student interaction and suggests that even non-academic interactions between students and professors can be meaningful to students. Finally, the typology will allow faculty, staff, and administrators to improve current practices and develop initiatives that build bridges between faculty and students outside of class.
Faculty-Student Interaction Outside of Class:

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Faculty-student interaction is an essential component of the collegiate experience. Significant research has demonstrated the importance of interaction between faculty and students both inside and outside of the classroom. Astin found that faculty-student interaction had a positive affect on both cognitive and affective student development (1993) and that faculty-student interaction was the variable most strongly related to student satisfaction in college (1977). Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) encouraged an increase in student-faculty interactions in order to improve career choice, personal growth, and student persistence. Wilson and Gaff (1975) found that faculty labeled as “most outstanding” and having the “most impact” on students were those who most frequently interacted with students outside of the classroom. In their meta-analyses of the higher education literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) identified a number of studies (Avalos, 1994; Berger, 1997; Kuh & Hu, 2001) that support a correlation between faculty-student interaction and positive student outcomes.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that informal interaction with faculty outside of the classroom may lead to enhanced intellectual development and affects student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Unfortunately, the value of faculty-student interaction is undermined by two factors. First, no value can be extracted from such interactions if they don’t take place. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicates that faculty-student interaction occurs less frequently than all but one of the five benchmarks for effective educational practice (2006). These relatively low levels of interaction exist in all types of institutions, but are lowest at doctoral universities with very high levels of research activity. Second, the quantity of faculty-
student interaction accounts only for one part of the equation; without understanding the quality of those interactions it is impossible to account for the related student outcomes (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005).

In other words, while educators know that faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom is associated with positive outcomes, there is little understanding of the process by which such interactions take place. Researchers are generally unsure why and how students and faculty engage with each other outside of the classroom. However, such an understanding is critical; without it, efforts to develop structures and cultures that foster these educationally productive interactions will be limited in both their efficiency and effectiveness. To successfully promote faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom, educators must understand how students make sense of their interactions with faculty members.

Therefore, this study investigates the full range of types and meanings of students’ interactions with faculty members outside of the classroom. Our research was guided by the following questions: (a) What is the nature of faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom, and (b) What conditions foster and inhibit these interactions? The resulting analysis yields a typology of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom that provides a framework through which educators can pursue future research and improve institutional practice.

Literature Review

Faculty-Student Interaction

Recent literature has confirmed what the early studies of faculty-student interaction suggested. Specifically, there is clearly a link between positive student outcomes and the quality and quantity of out-of-classroom interactions between undergraduates and faculty members. Anaya and Cole (2001) confirmed that quality relationships and communication with faculty had
a positive impact on student grades. Further, Hathaway, Nagda, and Gregerman (2002) indicated that undergraduate students’ interaction with faculty to conduct research may have a positive impact that extends beyond graduation.

Unfortunately, the research on faculty-student interaction is limited in its scope. The vast majority of research addressing faculty-student interaction focuses on interactions that take place within the classroom. Likely guided by early research suggesting that faculty-student interaction appeared to be most valuable when it related to academic, intellectual, or career matters (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1991; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hibeh, 1978), and Kuh, Shuh, Whitt, and Associates’ (1991) recognition of the tendency for out-of-class interaction to relate to academic issues, nearly all of the literature regarding faculty-student interaction has focused primarily on a narrow range of behaviors. Specifically, researchers have tailored their inquiries to interactions considered to be academic or intellectual (e.g., Anaya & Cole, 2001; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). In doing so, even while acknowledging that other types of interactions warrant additional study (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2004), available research has generally overlooked the potentially important “humanizing” and “personalizing” effect non-academic interaction might have on students’ perceived integration into the campus social and academic community (Colwell & Lifka, 1983).

Residential Learning Communities

Residential learning communities have evolved over the past decade in efforts to increase student involvement, satisfaction, and sense of community within residence halls (Altschuler & Kramnich, 1999; Schroeder & Mable, 1994). The concept of a residential learning community differs on every campus; however, “the central theme appears to be one of bringing about a
closer integration of the student’s living environment with his or her academic or learning environment” (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994, p.32).

One such residential learning community is the residential college. Residential colleges were first founded at Oxford and Cambridge nearly 800 years ago and were established in American higher education in 1933 with the founding of the Harvard House System (Ryan, 1993). According to Smith (1994), residential colleges are “experiencing a renaissance. Dozens of colleges and universities in North America are rediscovering the venerable benefits of teachers and students living, dining, and studying in the same building” (p. 241). Residential colleges are small cross-sectional societies of students and faculty within a larger university. The goal of a residential college is to increase students’ sense of community and integrate the social and academic domains of a large university into a tight-knit community (O’Hara, 2001). Oftentimes, faculty members reside with students in residential colleges.

Methodology

With few exceptions (Colwell & Lifka, 1983; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000), nearly every recent study of faculty-student interaction has used quantitative analyses to study what is a highly personal, complex set of experiences for both faculty and students. Several studies (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Grayson, 1999; Kuh & Hu, 2001) have used the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Additionally, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), delivered to thousands of students each year, explores faculty-student interaction as one of its “five clusters or benchmarks of effective educational practices” (Kuh, 2003, p. 26). A related assessment tool, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), asks similar questions of campus faculty. A recent study (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005) used the CIRP Freshman Survey and the College Student Survey from the Higher Education Research Institute. Using these
nationally distributed survey instruments, most recent studies investigate the nature of faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom by asking students a handful of questions about how often they, for example, “worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework” (NSSE, 2005) or “had coffee, Coke, or snacks with faculty” (CSEQ, 2000). While all of these instruments are nationally recognized and offer valuable insights into the experiences of undergraduate students, to keep within the constraints of both time and space they are required to use simple proxies to estimate complex constructs.

Breaking from this quantitative tradition, our use of a multi-method qualitative design freed us from the constraints of previous studies’ narrow definition of faculty-student interaction and allowed us to garner a more complete understanding of the nature of such interactions. Blending case-study and grounded theory approaches to qualitative research (Creswell, 1998), we hoped to develop an explanatory theory of faculty-student interaction based on data collected within an environment specifically tailored to foster such interactions. Moreover, whereas previous studies of faculty-student interaction have generally focused on relatively concrete outcomes by measuring the frequency of generic student experiences, our study explored the range and meaning of students’ individual, highly contextualized experiences.

Site of the study

For the purpose of this study, we investigated faculty-student interaction at a residential college within a large public research university. Essentially an effort to copy the “Oxbridge” cultures and communities of the finest British universities (Duke, 1991), the residential college in our study, also known as “the College,” included students ranging from freshmen through graduate students from a variety of disciplines. Approximately 40 faculty members from throughout the university were associated with the residential college. In their role as faculty
“associates”, these faculty members agreed to participate in College events such as College-wide dinners, teas, lectures, and banquets. Several of these associated faculty members also taught academic courses for students in the College. Because the residential college was established, in part, specifically to increase faculty-student interaction, a number of the College functions were developed to intentionally bring faculty into contact with students outside of the classroom.

Each month the College held “teas” that typically brought together over 100 students and several faculty members. Teas were a seemingly successful effort to simultaneously engage both faculty and students, bridging the two cultures while keeping a firm footprint in each. The use of the term “tea” – a reference to the British tradition in the Oxbridge model (Duke, 1991) – connotes formality and decorum, a subtle appeal to the faculty culture. Additionally, the teas were held in the live-in faculty “principal’s” apartment, a formally decorated abode complete with antique furniture and oil paintings of former University leaders. To entice the students, teas reliably offered a generous buffet of student-friendly food (e.g., chicken wings, cookies). Further, each tea was organized around a festive theme (e.g., a welcome-back tea, a Halloween tea) that was thought to appeal to students. As host of these teas, the faculty principal acted as a liaison between faculty and students.

College-wide dinners were required for all students and encouraged for all faculty members associated with the College. Dinner was served in a dining hall reserved for members of the College on Monday through Thursday evenings. The College-wide dinners were the setting most frequently available for faculty and students to interact. Faculty occasionally set up themed tables to encourage faculty and students to dine together over conversation around a common topic, like American literature or the French language.
All of the College’s official events, including teas and College-wide dinners, tried to maximize student and faculty participation. Accordingly, these events were free for the students and held on campus. However, affiliated faculty members were encouraged to develop their own supplemental initiatives. One such faculty-initiated event was the ethnic dining experience. Because they were not officially sponsored by the College, these events were optional for students and received no financial support from the College, meaning interested students were required to pay for their own meals. Further, to partake in truly ethnic cuisine, these events had to be held off-campus. Collectively, these factors limited student involvement. The typical ethnic dining event would draw approximately one dozen students and three professors. The ethnic dining experience we attended, an excursion to a local authentic Mexican restaurant, drew six faculty and eight College students of varied genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations.

**Researcher Relationship to Study**

For any qualitative study, it is important to consider how the position of the researcher affects the data collection, analysis, and conclusions. In the present study, our unique relationship to the community facilitated the building of rapport, the collection of data at College functions, and the eventual member-checking to ensure that the interpretation and analysis of the data was valid. Nonetheless, it may have also contributed to our initial expectation that faculty-student interaction would be both common and meaningful to students.

During the course of this study, we were sequentially employed as graduate assistants within the College. While neither of us lived in the College, each had an office in the building and assisted with various administrative requirements of the College (e.g., budgeting, admissions) and typically spent 20-30 hours per week in the building. In this position, we frequently worked with both the College’s faculty and its students, developing a strong rapport
with many of them. It was this familiarity that earned us acceptance as a part of the College’s in-group (Tajfel, 1982) and allowed us to attend various College functions without drawing undue attention. Moreover, our status as year-long graduate assistants allowed us to freely associate with both faculty and students without being perceived to represent the other (i.e., students didn’t think of us as faculty, yet faculty didn’t think of us as students). Our unique positions within the College suggest our data possess a “natural validity” (Warner, 1991, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278) because the behavior of our participants was likely unaffected by our presence.

Aware of the residential college’s goal of improved faculty-student interaction and intentional in our selection of students who were perceived to be active in the College, we began this study expecting to find that faculty-student interaction was frequent and meaningful to the College’s students. As such, our initial hope was that we could identify and encourage replication of effective institutional practices that foster such interaction. Nonetheless, our early observations and conversations suggested that present initiatives were less than optimally effective. Thus, instead of identifying institutional best practices, we shifted our focus to the students (as opposed to the institutional structures/programs) in an effort to understand how students’ perceptions affected institutional efforts to foster faculty-student interaction outside of class.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This study was conducted over a 12-month period ending in February, 2005. Following Patton’s (1990) guidelines, we sought to develop a holistic understanding of faculty-student interaction by participating in College events, noting both the content of the conversations and the context in which these interactions occurred. We used a multi-dimensional research approach
by conducting focus groups, interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and researcher observations (Jorgensen, 1989). Throughout this period, on eight different occasions, we observed three different types of College events. Our observations included the following: four teas for approximately one hour each, three College-wide dinners for thirty to ninety minutes each, and one off-campus ethnic dining experience. We chose to attend these events because they were the College’s most visible efforts to promote activities specifically designed to foster faculty-student interaction outside of class.

To explore the full breadth of interactions between students and faculty outside of the classroom, we also conducted focus groups with students that were active in the College. Our choice to focus on active students was purposeful (Manning, 1999) and reflected our desire to understand the various institutional mechanisms that encouraged faculty-student interaction. We suspected that active students would have experienced such mechanisms frequently and would be able to provide insight into the relative success of such initiatives. However, the real importance of having selected active students became apparent after we began our data collection. Upon recognition that even the most active students had only infrequent interaction with faculty outside of class, we realized that less active students would have been unable to provide the rich data required.

Using a semi-structured interview protocol developed after our initial observations at dinners and teas, we conducted four focus groups with four to five students in each. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour. Student participants included residence hall staff, members of the College’s hall government, and other students who, without any official title within the College, were perceived to be active members of the community.
To confirm the transferability of our data and findings, we also interviewed participants who might offer contradictory stories or provide alternate perspectives. With even the active students having had infrequent interaction with faculty, we surmised that the stories of inactive students would be unlikely to provide a counter-story. Instead, we hypothesized that faculty might make meaning of their interactions with students in a fundamentally different way than did the students. Therefore, two individual interviews were conducted with associated faculty members who were mentioned by students as being particularly engaged in the College. That faculty members expressed feelings roughly parallel to those of the students suggests that our findings represent a universal understanding of faculty-student interaction within the College.

Field notes were written immediately following observations of College events. Notes were taken during each interview and all focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Our data analysis began with open coding and was followed, upon the emergence of our typology, by axial coding (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

To ensure reliability of the data and the accuracy of our analysis, we requested and received feedback on our resulting typology from members of the College’s students, staff, and faculty. Furthermore, our multi-dimensional research procedures were intentionally designed to include three distinct forms of triangulation (Denzin, 1978). First, data were collected from multiple sources in multiple settings. Second, data were collected and analyzed by two researchers who collected data independently but confirmed axial coding together. Finally, multiple qualitative data collection methods – interviews, focus groups, and researcher observations – were used to triangulate the data.

Findings
We began our data analysis by openly coding the content and context of interactions between faculty and students. While our coding of content essentially entailed identifying the various subjects that came up in conversations between faculty members and students, our coding of the context involved a number of variables that influenced those interactions (e.g., location, event type, time, physical surroundings). Our resulting typology of interactions emerged as we recognized that the content of these interactions generally fell into five categories.

The typology includes five fluid, contextually influenced types of faculty-student interaction outside of class. These types of interactions are defined by both the subject (content) of the communication and its meaning to the student. They include (in descending order of frequency) disengagement, incidental contact, functional interaction, personal interaction, and mentoring.

The types of faculty-student interaction are not isolated or disconnected. Rather, they occur along a fluid, contextually influenced continuum. The fluidity within the typology occurs because of the often erratic nature of each conversation or relationship. As occurs in everyday discussions, faculty and students frequently drift in and out of topics, often in response to some change in the interaction’s context (e.g., another student entering the conversation, changes in time or setting). Data from our observations, focus groups, and interviews provide evidence of each of these types.

Disengagement
We define disengagement as faculty and students not interacting outside of class. Our study revealed that, despite institutionally established conduits through which interaction could occur, the majority of the students and faculty were not engaged with one another outside of class. The most obvious indicator of disengagement was the absence of faculty at College functions. Never, during any of our observations of the teas or dinners, did we see more than eight faculty members at the event at the same time.

A more subtle form of disengagement occurred when faculty and students, though physically proximate, chose not to directly interact with one another. One example of this type of disengagement occurred at a College-wide dinner we observed. Two faculty members were sitting in the second to last seats, across the table from each other, at one end of a double-long rectangular table. The rest of the table had four students sitting together with one space between them and the professors. The faculty members were engaged in their own conversation, while the students were engaged separately in their own. Moreover, the students closest to the faculty turned in their chairs a little, and were leaning forward, as to almost turn their backs on the faculty. The faculty members showed no visible sign of being bothered or offended. In fact, the faculty members and students seemed to be oblivious of each other.

We found situations like this at all of the events that we observed. Even when in the same room at events, faculty and students tended not to interact with one another. Students in our focus groups were keenly aware of the disengagement. When we asked about her relationship with the faculty, a freshman responded “at the moment, they occasionally walk through the building, and I see them walk through the building and just kind of, yeah, it’s a faculty person, back to what I was doing.” Another freshman, Mandy, pointed out “I know there’s one of the professors in the poli-sci department I was introduced to last fall was also supposed to be a
faculty associate at [the College], I’ve never seen him either.” Todd, a sophomore, noted “I don’t see very many others [faculty]. Eight is about it.” Students even suspected they all knew the same eight faculty associates. Thus, even within a small community that intentionally fostered faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom, only eight of the 40 associated faculty members had made enough contact with students to be remembered.

Incidental Contact

The second most frequently observed type of faculty-student interaction was incidental contact. Incidental contact occurs when there is unintentional contact between faculty and students. Polite greetings and waves are typical of the interactions labeled as incidental contact. At a Halloween tea we noticed Tim Thomas (faculty member) and Linda Mann (faculty member) talking to each other in the corner of the dining room. There were students around them getting food but no students were talking to the faculty members. When a student dressed as a pink fairy was getting food, Linda commented about her costume. The student then told Linda how her friend made the costume. The total conversation lasted less than two minutes, and we observed no further interaction between Linda and the student during the rest of the event. Like all incidental contact, this interaction was trivial and perfunctory; the student and faculty member began talking to each other simply because they came into contact with one another while getting food.

In focus groups, students mentioned these incidental contacts regularly. When asked about his interactions with faculty a freshman male commented “It is pretty much just happenstance. I mean like saying ‘good morning’ to them on my way out to the lobby.” Megan, a sophomore, agreed and noted, “I mostly see them in the lobby and I say ‘hello’ and they say ‘hello’ and they might stay in the lobby for two minutes and talk about something and then they
go.” Rick, the College’s faculty Principal, reluctantly acknowledged the prominence of these types of interactions. During a tea, he asked us to tell him what we had observed. We started saying “faculty-student interaction was…” and Rick completed the sentence with “superficial.” Nonetheless, Colwell and Lifka (1983) suggest that, just by spending time with students outside of the classroom, faculty can “serve as adult models and inspirations” (p. 9) for students. For some students in our study, the mere presence of faculty members at out-of-class College events was valuable. One student, Susan, noted,

It is kind of nice having them around. They are always at College dining with us. We always see at least one or two faculty members in there, in College dining. It’s just really nice to see. It just feels like you have this camaraderie, this family, it’s nice to see adults around, especially when you are a college student.

**Functional Interaction**

Functional interaction occurs for a specific institutionally-related purpose. Kuh, Shuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) have suggested that this is this type of interaction that occurs most frequently: “student-faculty interaction out of class, when it occurs, usually is directly or indirectly related to academic activities and concerns” (p. 174). This type of interaction can include students asking faculty academic questions, students and faculty working on a College project together, or faculty asking students institution-related questions. When asked about his interactions with students, Dr. Thomas lamented that, despite having an office in the College building, and regularly teaching at the College over the last nine years, “I’ve only had one student who asked me any question about getting ready for a history test. She told me afterwards it really helped, it really helped her grade. But, she didn’t come back.”
An example from a tea also illustrates functional interaction. A student came up to Rick, the College’s live-in faculty principal. She asked “What does ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny mean?” This saying was written in red upon the base of a 5’x4’ picture hanging above the piano in the living room. Rick had created the artwork, a fact the student apparently knew. Rick said the saying was one of his favorites, and that it meant that “the development of the individual replicated the development of the species.” He gave the human race as an example. The female student listened carefully. When Rick completed his explanation, she nodded as though she understood, and gave an affirming noise (like an “uh-huh”). Then she turned around and went back into the room with other students. In this case, the student used Rick as an intellectual resource; however, the interaction failed to initiate any further conversation. Functional interactions such as those described above have an easily recognizable value. When a student asks a faculty member an academic/intellectual question and receives an accurate answer, the benefit to the student is obvious.

Less obvious however, is the recognition that this type of interaction can lead to personal interaction if both the student and the faculty member realize they have something in common. Sam, a sophomore, spoke excitedly about an interaction she had with a faculty member:

It wasn’t even necessarily having to do with anything we particularly talked about in class. I think it came up really briefly. It was, uh, non-proliferation treaty, and there had been a question that I was always curious about but I never really had anyone who was educated enough, I guess, in this particular topic, to answer my question, until recently. So I was like “I’ll drop by your office.” And it wasn’t even office hours. But I went and I was like “I just had a question about this. I was wondering if blah, blah, blah…” and she sat down and was like “you know I’m so glad you came because it just shows…” and so
she and I just sat down and had a twenty minute conversation… It was just, how class was that day, um, the interesting class dynamics between me and somebody else in the class. How a friend of mine, Kelly, was doing, who had just recently gone into the hospital. Stuff like that. Like, we talk about everything.

For another student, a last minute study session developed into a relaxed, personal conversation:

Milton Mathews [faculty member] offered his knowledge in the math department to help with final exams last semester, and I really needed that at the time, and he helped me out, he offered his knowledge, and his guidance through the horrible time I was having with math, and we, afterwards, we would just sit and talk for about ten or fifteen minutes, just about whatever’s going on.

While each of these students began their conversations with faculty members in an effort to address some matter of intellectual or institutional importance, they all received more than just an academic answer. They received the personal attention that is often so difficult to find as a student at a large research university.

**Personal Interaction**

In personal interaction, the interaction is purposeful (which distinguishes it from incidental contact) and it revolves around the personal interest(s) of a faculty member and/or student (which distinguishes it from functional interaction). This is the type of interaction where a personal – as distinguished from a purely professional –relationship can develop between a professor and a student.

Typically, personal interaction develops from functional interaction as happened in Sam’s conversation described earlier. However, personal interaction can also develop directly
from incidental contact. For example, we observed James, a student, and Dr. Greg, a professor, transition from incidental contact to personal interaction within a matter of minutes.

Approaching from the back at about 9:15am, Dr. Greg was walking towards the College. James exited the back door of the College and headed in the direction of Dr. Greg. As they came close, they both acknowledged each other and stopped to engage in a conversation. Dr. Greg said he “wanted to set up a lunch with James, Jack, Susan,” (All of these students were writers and literary scholars-in-the-making, and all were part of the dinner Greg Group. Dr. Greg regularly met with these students on Tuesday nights for dinner at the College). Dr. Greg asked James “When are you available? Though James’ response was inaudible, Dr. Greg followed with “call Rachael” (his secretary). Then each went their own way. Thus, what started as a brief hello between passing acquaintances ended up as a mutually desired plan for personal interaction.

In focus groups, students talked about their personal interactions with faculty members and what these interactions meant to them. One student commented:

Dustin Brown [faculty], he and I went for coffee the other night before the meeting that they had in the lodge. And we just really talked about life. You know, and that’s really good to have some guy who spent most of his time in mathematics, and science, and you have this sort of idea of what he may talk about, and you know, too, um, he can talk about it a lot more than sometimes you need, but they’re all people, and they are all people, and they talk about just various things. And they’re interested.

The topics discussed during personal interaction were unrelated to academics or the University. Brenda, a sophomore, noted, “I’ve never talked to any [faculty associates] about classes. I know others go to advisors to ask about professors…I just go talk to them at dinner. They have interesting stories that I’ve never even dreamed of and [they are] fun to talk to.”
When students engage in personal interactions with faculty they feel valued and important. As Mandy put it “you become more than just a number…you’re no longer just another one, you’re an individual, you have a name, you have a background, and they know you personally, and that personal connection, that relationship means a lot.” Through personal interaction, students can develop personal relationships with faculty in which the professors become what the students called “friends” or “peers” who were concerned about the students’ lives. The professors, who may be the most visible symbols of the University, become more human and less institutional. Jacob, a freshman commented:

It's all about the person and your interaction with them because they are not so much professor but after you get to know them, they’re more a person who you like talking to. ‘Cause I know that's how it is for me because like with Dr. Greg I would, I just sit down with him lots of times, like at dinner and we would just talk.

Katie, another first-year student, agreed that “…if you ever get a chance to sit down with most of the faculty associates they will treat you like you’re the same level as them. Apparently, you’re fellow faculty members or something, instead of a student. It’s just great.” Though personal interaction did not occur as frequently as incidental contact or functional interaction, those who did engage in personal interactions clearly recognized the ”humanizing” and “personalizing” effects that Colwell and Lifka (1983) suggested could improve the college student experience.

**Mentoring**

The final type of faculty-student interaction is mentoring. However, this is also the most infrequent type and the most difficult to define. Despite several universities’ recent development of official/institutional “mentoring” programs (e.g., California State University System, and
undergraduate research programs at the University of Michigan and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), we defined mentoring not in terms of programs, but in terms of relationships. Specifically, we considered mentoring to be the “highest end on a continuum of helping relationships” (Jacobi, 1991, p 511). To be labeled as a mentoring relationship in our study, the relationship must have met all three criteria set forth by Anderson et al. (1995), who summarized Jacobi’s work: (a) direct assistance with career and professional development, (b) emotional and psychosocial support, and (c) role modeling. In essence, mentoring minimally required an extended relationship built on both functional and personal interactions.

Through our observations and focus groups we found only one student with a relationship that met our definition. For the student being mentored, these relationships were very important to his day-to-day life. John, a junior in the College who had mentoring relationships with a number of faculty members noted:

Well, you know, the thing is there’s a lot of instances in life, in college life, that occur, that I have no idea how to handle, you know I just ‘what the hell do I do here?’ And these people [faculty] understand and they really help. You know someone like Adam [points to someone else in focus group], might be going through, and has yet to go through something that I am currently dealing with, or whatever. And Tim or Henry or Bob Brown or Bill Kent or any of those people [faculty]…they most likely [have] been there and they understand you.

In this case, the faculty members’ life experiences are why John feels he can rely on them as mentors.

Ironically, though we observed little mentoring and few students mentioned having such relationships, the faculty we interviewed viewed themselves as mentors to students. When asked
about the role he plays in students’ lives Dr. Greg responded “students look to me as a model.”

Note that Dr. Greg’s perception of himself as a role model completes our three criteria for a mentor. He continued to say students were “comfortable with me” and he was comfortable with the students. Though he doubted they talked to him like they did their roommates, he said they could talk to him normally because “I’m not judging them.” In fact, when recounting a recent discussion he had with a College student, Dr. Gregg was intrigued by the student’s expertise in comic books and stated that “[the student] teaches me.” Dr. Greg mentioned that he would often “learn from the students.” He went on to say that this creates a certain “trust level between me and the students.” Just like all human relationships, then, trust appeared to be an essential element of the out-of-class relationships between students and faculty.

Discussion

Educators have long known that a significant portion of student learning in college occurs outside of the classroom and that faculty-student interaction is an important part of the college experience. Yet meaningful faculty-student interaction outside of class is still elusive on many campuses. Perhaps the most striking finding from this study is the general lack of interaction between professors and students outside of class. This finding mirrors those from other studies (NSSE, 2006). What makes our finding remarkable is that such disengagement occurred within a well-funded residential college intentionally designed to foster meaningful interactions between students and faculty members outside of class. Nonetheless, both students and professors were universally frustrated by the infrequency of interaction.

That such major structural and financial investments garnered only marginal returns leaves us wondering if different institutional initiatives may be any more successful. While residential learning communities have emerged sporadically across the country, many
institutions have begun other novel initiatives designed to foster faculty-student interaction. Some schools (e.g. St. Petersburg College, Santa Fe Community College) have articulated policies that require a minimum number of faculty office hours. Other institutions (e.g. the California State University system) have asked faculty members to “mentor” certain students. More prominently, colleges and universities across the country have begun summer reading and undergraduate research programs to help their students engage with faculty members outside of the classroom. Evaluations of these initiatives, perhaps using the typology presented in this study, may shed further light on the efficacy of institutional efforts to increase faculty-student interaction.

However, we suspect isolated programs will have only marginal effects. Changes to policies, structures, and finances will only be successful so much as they build an institutional culture that values out-of-class faculty-student interaction as an important component of the collegiate experience. As Strange and Banning (2001) remind us, individual structures and organizations, like residential learning communities, may have their own cultures that “assist participants, staff as well as students, in making meaning of the college experience” (pg. 104). The cultures of these residential learning communities, however, represent just one component of the student experience and may only minimally mediate a larger institutional culture. Thus, substantive improvements in faculty-student interaction will require systemic and coordinated efforts to adjust the wider institutional culture (Ewell, 1997).

While we have placed special emphasis here on the influence of institutional initiatives and campus culture, several other factors shape the quantity and quality of faculty-student interactions occurring at an institution. In fact, to varying degrees, we found evidence to support each of the four “interrelated domains of influence on the level of faculty out-of-class
interactions with undergraduates: intensity of competing time demands; institutional norms and
practices; personal beliefs and attitudes; and interpersonal skills” (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2004,
p. 2). The ultimate challenge for institutions seeking to improve faculty-student interaction
outside of class, therefore, is to coordinate efforts that simultaneously address each of these
issues.

Limitations of the Study

This study was bounded by several limitations. Perhaps most importantly, the research
was conducted in an institutional setting that may inhibit the generalizability of the findings.
Students were essentially self-selected to become part of a community intentionally designed, in
part, to foster faculty-student interaction. As such, both the quantity and quality of interactions
taking place at the College may be greater than would be typical in most higher education
settings.

Second, the participants in our study, both the students and the faculty, were active
members of the College community. Again, these participants likely had more out-of-class
interaction than is typical.

Finally, we extol readers to use caution when considering relative importance of each
type of faculty-student interaction. While it may be instinctual to infer that mentoring
relationships are the most valuable to students – and that our typological pyramid represents a
value-ranked hierarchy of interactions – our study provides insufficient evidence to support this
conclusion. Rather, our findings suggest that all interactions (except disengagement) have value
and that the value of a particular type of interaction is dependent upon the individual student and
the context(s) in which such interactions take place.

Suggestions for Future Research
As suggested earlier, campus culture can facilitate or inhibit out-of-class faculty-student interactions. Thus, it is likely that the frequency and relative distribution of each type of interaction will vary in different institutional contexts. So too might the meaning of such interactions vary across the wide landscape of higher education institutions. Therefore, replication of this study in other institutional environments may yield additional rich data that could lead to an even more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between institutions, faculty, and students. Future research should also explore how differences between student and faculty racial, gender, and sexual identities may affect these interactions.

Another potential track for future research relates to the growing use of technologically-enhanced communication on campus. Emerging evidence suggests the communication that takes place via e-mail is qualitatively different from communication that occurs face-to-face (An & Frick, 2006). Students may use email as a way to initiate interactions with professors they might otherwise have been unwilling to do in person. It would be prudent for future research to consider how technologies like e-mail affect the relative frequency of each interaction type and how the electronic medium either fosters or interferes with transitions from one type of interaction to another.

Finally, to improve future efforts to bolster faculty-student interaction outside of class, researchers must continue working to identify the personal and institutional factors that facilitate such interaction. While previous research has suggested that members of the faculty with particular beliefs about teaching or at certain points in the tenure/rank scale are most likely to interact with students outside of class (see Einarson & Clarkberg, 2004 for a review), there has heretofore been little articulation of specific, transferable behaviors that can improve faculty interaction with students outside of classroom walls. Our study found that even those faculty and
students who desire high levels of meaningful interaction with each other can remain frustrated by their inability to make such interactions happen. That such inability occurred within an institutional context specifically designed to promote interaction suggests that institutions are still searching for efficient ways to foster faculty-student interaction outside of class. Therefore, it is our hope that future research will identify specific personal and institutional tools that can be employed to bring students and faculty together in meaningful ways outside of class.

Conclusion

Contrary to the prevailing perspective in earlier research, our study suggests that virtually every type of interaction between faculty and students can have positive effects. While our findings confirm the value of functional interaction, they also indicate that incidental contacts, personal interactions, and mentoring can be meaningful to students. Even the most fleeting interactions with faculty outside of class (i.e., incidental contact) can help students overcome the professional distance implicit in a classroom setting. Moreover, incidental contact, though often unintentional and superficial, can serve as a stepping stone to more substantial interactions later. Personal interactions between professors and students, though perhaps not leading directly to better student performance or persistence, nonetheless help students feel important and valued as members of the institution. Considering faculty members are often the most visible academic representatives of an institution, it seems likely that personal interactions with faculty outside of class contribute to students’ intellectual congruence within the institution, a key factor in student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Finally, when mentoring relationships grow naturally out of functional and personal interactions both students and professors benefit from the symbiotic relationship.
Perhaps, then, by embracing the notion that faculty-student interaction outside of class need not be formal or academic to hold value, institutions of higher learning can begin to tap the full potential of such interactions as an integral component of the undergraduate experience.
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Figure 1

Typology of Faculty-Student Interaction

- Mentoring
- Personal Interaction
- Functional Interaction
- Incidental Contact
- Disengagement

Frequency of Occurrence
Authors’ Note

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