FACULTY-STUDENT CONTACT *OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM:* SUPPORTING EVIDENCE & PROMOTING PRACTICES

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Introduction

This document first provides a review of the research literature is provided on the relationship between student-faculty contact outside the classroom and various educational outcomes. The document concludes with a series of two-dozen practices that serve to promote meaningful faculty-student contact outside the classroom.

Review of the Research

In short, research indicates that faculty-student contact outside the classroom is empirically associated with multiple, positive outcomes, such as:

(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*
(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.

The research evidence 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.

Perhaps the first and most impressive set of research findings pointing to the positive impact of student-faculty contact outside the classroom were reported by Wilson et al. (1975), who conducted an 8-institutional study over a 4-year span that included survey and interview data gathered from 4,815 students and 1,472 faculty. This study revealed that faculty who were consistently nominated by students and professional colleagues as "most outstanding," as having the "most impact" on students, and as playing a role in students' "choice of major" were those who interacted most frequently with students outside the classroom. In addition, those students who showed the most gains in intellectual achievement and reported the most satisfaction with the academic and nonacademic aspects of their college experience were students who reported more

contact with faculty, particularly contacts that occurred outside the classroom. The authors of this comprehensive research report reached the following conclusion: "The relationships that faculty and students develop outside the classroom may well be the part of teaching which has the greatest impact on students" (p. 107).

Several years later, George Kuh reviewed the scholarly literature on college quality and concluded: "The empirical evidence seems unequivocal: Faculty-student interaction is an important part of a quality undergraduate experience" (1981, p. 21). In a more recent, national report on indices of college quality, the Education Commission of the States included out-of-class contact with faculty as one of its 12 essential attributes of good practice, stating that: "Through such contact, students are able to see faculty members less as experts than as role models for ongoing learning" (1995, p. 8).

A host of specific research findings underscore the importance of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom. For instance, Astin (1993) completed a longitudinal study over a 25-year period, which included a national sample of approximately 500,000 students and 1300 institutions of all types. He found that student-faculty interaction was significantly correlated with *every* academic achievement outcome examined, namely: college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional school. Levine & Cureton (1998) infer from Astin's findings that, "Despite the wide variation in the cultures of our nation's academic institutions, the value of human connection remains important" (p. 131).

In addition, Astin has found that student-faculty contact outside the classroom correlates more strongly with ***college satisfaction*** than any other single variable. Drawing on longitudinal data gathered from 200,000 students in 300 institutions of all types, Astin reports that:

> Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other variable [and] any student characteristic or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even administration of the institution (1977, pp. 223 & 233).

Other studies have demonstrated that student-faculty contact outside the classroom correlates positively with undergraduate students' (a) ***academic achievement*** (Astin & Panos, 1969; Centra & Rock, 1970; Pascarella, 1980) (b) ***personal and intellectual development*** (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Lacy, 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978), (c) ***critical thinking*** (Wilson, 1975), (d) ***satisfaction with faculty*** (Astin, 1993), (e) ***perceptions of college quality*** (Theophilides & Terenzini, 1981), and (f) ***educational aspirations*** (Astin & Panos, 1969), such as their decision to pursue advanced (graduate) degrees (Kocher & Pascarella, 1987; Pascarella, 1980; Stoecker, Pascarella & Wolfle, 1988). In particular, student-faculty contact outside the classroom that involves the following topics has been found to be most strongly associated with positive academic outcomes: (a) intellectual issues, (b) literary or artistic interests, (c) values, and (d) future career plans (Pascarella, 1980).

Furthermore, there is abundant evidence that informal student-faculty contact outside the classroom correlates positively with ***student retention*** (Bean, 1981; Pascarella 1980;

Pascarella & Terenzini 1979, Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977, 1978). On the basis of his extensive consulting experiences with colleges interested in promoting student retention, Lee Noel (1978) offers the following observation:

> It is increasingly apparent that the most important features of a "staying" environment relate to the instructional faculty. Students make judgments about their academic experience on the basis of such factors as quality of instruction, freedom to contact faculty for consultation, availability of faculty for consultation, and faculty involvement outside the classroom (pp. 96-97).

In a comprehensive review of the research literature, Vince Tinto (1987) reached a similar conclusion: "Institutions with low rates of student retention are those in which students generally report low rates of student-faculty contact. Conversely, institutions with high rates of retention are most frequently those which are marked by relatively high rates of such interactions" (p. 66).

Moreover, informal out-of-class contact between faculty and students has been found to be particularly beneficial in promoting the persistence of students who are *"withdrawal prone,"* such as low-income, first-generation college students (Tinto, 1975). Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) found that frequency of non-classroom contact between students and faculty, which involved discussion of academic issues, had its most positive influence on the persistence of students with low initial commitment to college and students whose parents had relatively low levels of formal education. Consistent with these quantitative findings is the qualitative research reported by Vince Tinto, stemming from interviews he conducted with especially high-risk students who beat the odds and succeeded in college. He discovered that, "*In every case*, the students cited one or two events, when someone on the faculty or—less commonly—the staff had made personal contact with them outside the classroom. That's what made the difference" (Levitz, 1990).

This observation is supported by an analysis of student narratives written 30 years after graduating from Rollins College, in response to a letter asking for stories about their most effective professors. Many of the memories reported in the student narratives about their most effective instructors related to their informal, out—of-class contact with them (Carson, 2000). One student wrote that a conversation at a professor's home made it easier to "see [my professor] as a person rather than a lecturer and also [made me] feel like she appreciated my opinions and insights." Another alum wrote about her professor's accessibility and her own classroom performance, remembering that, "It motivated me to perform well in his classes."

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 favorable impact on the intellectual development of students (Moore, Peterson & Wirag, 1984).

Faculty-student contact outside the classroom has also been associated with positive outcomes for different student *subpopulations*. For instance, positive correlations between frequency of student-faculty contact and cognitive growth have been reported for *transfer students* (Volkwein, King and Terenzini, 1986). Also, student-faculty interaction outside the classroom has been found to relate positively to the intellectual self-image and career aspirations of *female* students (Komarovsky, 1985). Such interaction also correlates positively with the intellectual self-image and persistence of *African-American* students' (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Lewis, 1987). As Davis (1991) notes, "Black students on white campuses who have good relations with faculty have never seriously considered dropping out of school and have greater satisfaction with their campus lives" (p. 154).

Moreover, Tinto (1993) points out that student contact with faculty, especially outside of class, is an *independent* predictor of learning gain or growth, i.e., its association with intellectual development remains significant even after one takes account of differences in students' ability, prior levels of development, and prior educational experience. Tinto's observation is reinforced by an extensive literature review of more than 2500 studies conducted by Pascarella and Terenizini (1991), who report findings indicating that out-of-class contact with faculty has a "statistically significant *direct effect* on various dimensions of career interest and career choice above and beyond the influence of selection factors" (p. 479, italics added). These results are consistent with the conclusion reached by Pascarella (1980), following his critical review and synthesis of a large number of studies that were specifically designed to investigate the relationship between student-faculty contact and educational outcomes:

> The significant associations between student-faculty informal contact and educational outcomes are not merely the result of covariation with individual differences in student entering characteristics or with college experiences in other areas. Rather, various facets and quality of student informal contact with faculty may make a unique contribution to college impact. In turn, this suggests the possibility that colleges and universities may be able to positively influence the extent and quality of student-faculty contact, and thereby faculty impact on students, in ways other than the kinds of students they enroll. If such interaction has a significant, positive influence on student development, then it becomes important to determine the extent to which it might be influenced by purposeful institutional policies (pp. 564-566).

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. Listed below are some hypotheses about why faculty-student contact outside the classroom has such high impact:
(1) 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.

(2) 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.

(3) Faculty verbal interaction with students outside the classroom is likely to be more conversational or dialogic and less didactic or prescriptive than it is inside the classroom.

(4) It is an individualized person-to-person interaction, where the faculty/student ratio is 1:1—an idea social context for learning.

(5) 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.

(6) 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 remembering those ideas, because s/he will be evaluated (graded) for comprehension of them.

The contemporary significance of all the positive outcomes associated with informal out-of-class contact between students and faculty is magnified further by reports indicating that the frequency of such contact is *decreasing*. Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt (1991) report that faculty are now spending more of their non-teaching time in the pursuit of research and publication, leaving out-of-class contact with undergraduates to student affairs' staff. In a more recent, large-scale study conducted by Milem, Berger, and Day (cited in Braxton, 2000), it was found that faculty members in virtually all types of postsecondary institutions (e.g., research universities, comprehensive institutions, and liberal arts colleges) are spending more time engaged in classroom teaching and research, and less time interacting with students outside the classroom.

   This shift in faculty priorities and reward systems suggests that contemporary undergraduates are losing a valuable source of influence that has the capacity to exert multiple, positive effects on their collegiate and post-collegiate success. Unless postsecondary institutions engage in institutional practices that are intentionally or purposely designed to promote faculty-student contact outside the classroom, prevailing faculty interests and reward systems make it unlikely that such contact will occur either systematically or serendipitously.

Practices for Promoting Meaningful Student-Faculty Contact Outside the Classroom
   Listed below is a sample of institutional practices that may be intentionally or purposely designed and implemented to increase faculty-student contact outside the classroom.

- Faculty participate in *new-student **orientation*** by leading small-group discussions relating to summer reading or short reading given during orientation.

- Faculty interact with students at a reception following *new-student **convocation***.

- Faculty serve as ***mentors*** to undergraduates, and periodically meet with them in out-of-class contexts for the purpose of promoting their collegiate success.

- The college explicitly designates a specific number of *student clubs and organizations* for faculty sponsorship or moderation.

- The college expects academic departments to sponsor *departmental clubs* for students majoring in their field, which include faculty sponsors.

- Faculty members visit *student residences* to conduct small-group discussions, conduct tutoring sessions, or advise students.

- *Faculty-in-residence* program is developed, whereby a teaching faculty member lives in a student residence and provides out-of-class instruction, advising, or mentoring assistance to residential students who co-occupy the same unit.

- The college provides specific *faculty incentives* for becoming involved with students outside the classroom (e.g., stipends for taking students to lunch/dinner or cultural/athletic events; release time; merit pay; credit toward promotion and tenure; student-service awards to publicly recognize outstanding faculty contributions to students outside the classroom; incentive grants for faculty who involve students as partners in teaching or research).

- The importance of faculty-student contact outside the classroom is explicitly highlighted in *new-faculty orientation* and promoted via *faculty development* activities.

- The college adopts a formal *policy* about the minimum number of weekly *office hours* that faculty are expected to be available to undergraduates.

- College faculty are *trained, evaluated, and rewarded* for providing *academic advising* to first-year students on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom.

- Faculty are encouraged to *schedule office visits/conferences* with individual students or small groups of students enrolled in their classes.

- *Students interview faculty* as a required or optional course assignment (e.g., As a first-year seminar assignment, students interview a faculty member in their major or a potential field of interest.)

- Faculty are encouraged to sponsor out-of-class educational activities that promote personal contact with students, such as: *independent studies*, *field work, internships*, or *service-learning* experiences.

- College *committees* are intentionally structured to include both student and faculty representation.

- Faculty-student *research teams* are sponsored, whereby a faculty member involves undergraduate students in his or her field of research, for which students gain experience as research assistants and a potential product for use as a senior honors thesis, joint

conference presentation with a faculty member, or professional publication co-authored with a faculty member.

- ***Undergraduate student fellows*** receive stipends for working 10-20 hours per week with faculty mentors on collaborative research projects or creative productions.

- Faculty-student ***teaching teams*** are encouraged, whereby a faculty member co-teaches a course with an undergraduate. (For example, a faculty member and a sophomore or upper-division student team-teach a freshman seminar.)

- Undergraduate ***teaching assistant*** opportunities are offered, in which upper-division students work closely with faculty mentors to gain insight into the teaching role and gain direct teaching experience. Students receive academic credit for their work as undergraduate teaching assistants and for their participation in a preparatory seminar covering course planning, classroom instruction, and student evaluation.

- ***Student management teams*** are developed by course instructors, in which a team of 4-6 students is selected by their instructor to serve as "student managers" for the course, and assume responsibility for promoting the quality teaching and learning. The role of this student management team is to solicit comments from other students and meet with the instructor outside of class to dialogue about possible course improvements. Student managers may participate in a training program to prepare them for this role.

- Opportunities for faculty-student ***collaborative course development*** are available, whereby faculty members design new courses relating to contemporary issues or emerging areas of interest by collaborating with a selected group of undergraduates, who assist in course planning and syllabus development.

- Faculty-student technological ***support service teams*** are developed whereby student assistants who are technologically advanced work with faculty, staff, and other students in the area of information technology. The institution benefits by capitalizing on student expertise to help combat support-service shortages on campus. In the process, students benefit from out-of-class interaction with faculty, and acquire technical and human service skills that prepare them for higher-paying, part-time work in information industries while they are still in college, and for entry-level technology positions after college.

- The college offers a ***federated learning community***, a learning community model in which a faculty member takes the same courses as a cohort of students and serves as a "master learner." The faculty member meets regularly with these students outside the classroom to help them master and integrate concepts taught in the different courses.

- The college offers ***ESL-linked transitional courses***, in which an English as a Second Language (ESL) faculty member participates as a learner in an academic discipline-based course (e.g., History) that contains a group of ESL students. The ESL instructor meets

regularly with these students outside the classroom to help them master the course material.

Conclusion

The range of potential strategies in the foregoing list suggests that intentional promotion of faculty-student contact outside the classroom is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is best addressed with a comprehensive, coordinated approach that involves diverse divisions or units of the college. A truly comprehensive, institution-wide response would embrace the following elements: (a) student development services, (b) office of academic affairs, (c), academic departments, (d) college committee structures, (e) the curriculum, (f) the co-curriculum, (g) faculty orientation/development, and (h) faculty evaluation/rewards.

Given the multiple positive outcomes that are empirically associated with faculty-student interaction outside the classroom, an integrated college-wide approach to stimulate such interaction may be expected to promote systemic and synergistic effects on student development.

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