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Understanding the Development of Honors Students' Connections with Faculty

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Abstract: Nearly 40% of full-time students enrolled at four-year institutions depart within the first year. Previous research has shown college students are more likely to graduate if they have meaningful interactions with faculty. Honors students provide unique perspectives because of their high levels of interaction with faculty, yet not much is known about how these connections develop. The purpose of this study was to understand how honors students develop connections with faculty. Six upper-division students were interviewed, and participants reflected on meaningful connections made with faculty during their first year. Two themes were identified as influential in developing connections: approachability of faculty and motivation of students.

Keywords: students, faculty, connections, retention

The U.S. Department of Education estimated that nearly 40% of full-time students enrolled at four-year institutions depart within the first year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Attrition rates at two-year institutions were even higher, with nearly half of students dropping out by their second year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Previous research has shown, though, that college students are more likely to persist and graduate if they have meaningful interactions with faculty (Astin, 1999; Cho & Auger, 2013; Kuh et al., 2007). Moreover, many programs, such as honors programs, aid retention efforts by creating opportunities for students to engage with faculty. These opportunities are widely understood to positively impact retention; however, much is left unknown about how these interactions and connections are fostered between faculty and students.

Meaningful interactions between faculty and students promote a sense of connection. This increased type of interaction, particularly outside of the formal classroom, decreases student attrition and increases persistence until graduation (Glass et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2014). Additionally, interactions with faculty increase students' satisfaction, academically and socially, while in college (Braxton, 2006; Hoffman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Informal interactions with faculty also increase students' academic achievement and their intellectual and personal development (Shepherd & Tsong, 2014; Schreiner et al., 2011).

Several researchers have examined the outcomes of faculty-student interactions and found students with interpersonal self-esteem were more likely to seek out faculty, thereby increasing meaningful interactions (Astin, 1997; Clark et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These meaningful interactions then aid in developing deep connections with faculty. In another study, students and faculty were interviewed to determine the nature of conversations between the faculty and students (Hoffman, 2014). Students perceived academic matters, career aspirations, and campus problems as the most influential types of conversations with faculty (Hoffman, 2014; Schreiner et al., 2011; Shepherd & Tsong, 2014).

Understanding the interactions between faculty and students is vital to considering how meaningful connections develop. Many institutions have specialized programs to increase student engagement with faculty such as mentoring programs, research teams, and honors programs. For honors students, these meaningful interactions with faculty are cultivated on multiple levels, including small class sizes, research opportunities, and co-curricular or out of classroom experiences. Honors programs within higher education readily provide students with opportunities to develop connections with faculty. Moreover, honors students provide unique perspectives arising from their intentional socialization with faculty via honors programs. The purpose of this study was to understand how connections develop between honors students and faculty from the student perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, academically high-achieving students within higher education are drawn toward honors programs for the prestige, challenge, and opportunities such programs provide. With over 600 honors programs already in existence in 2002 across various institutional types, many high-achieving students have participated in these programs and connected to

the institution in intentional ways (Digby, 2002). These programs have aided high-achieving students in connecting with peers and provided a more enriching academic experience. Many such students have felt added pressure to continue their high achievement while in college, and some struggle with coursework because they have been capable of success with little effort (Neumeister, 2004). Nonetheless, honors programs increase the likelihood of academically high-achieving students' persistence and retention rates.

Typically, honors programs provide students with a number of resources to acclimate them to the academic community, support services, and curricular opportunities beyond the classroom. These programs do not simply provide academic challenges but are a valuable way for high-achieving students to integrate into the university. Within many honors programs, connecting with faculty in formal and informal ways is critical. Programs often offer ways for undergraduates to gain research experience and other advancement opportunities through connections with faculty. For these students, connecting with faculty in a collegial way is important individually and increases broader persistence and retention in the university setting (Hoffman, 2014; Kem & Navan, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006).

Retention

Retention remains an issue within higher education. Students and institutions have a stake in the benefits of retention and graduation. For students, upward mobility, cultural and social capital, and rewarding employment are some of the perceived benefits of graduation. Furthermore, for those students who matriculate but do not graduate, the debt accrued during their collegiate years can be doubly detrimental. In contrast, institutions often look at retention rates to determine institutional effectiveness. Graduation and retention rates play a role in institutional rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*. These criteria have been weighted anywhere from 20 to 25% within the overall rankings (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2010). Retention and graduation rates are indicators of success for colleges and universities, and undergraduate students' success can be negatively affected by attrition (Hoffman, 2014; Glass et al., 2015; Schreiner et al., 2011).

The highest college dropout rates occur between the first and second years of college (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Reason, 2009). Since roughly 40% of students leave an institution before their second year, institutions need to evaluate the first-year college experience and strategies for retention (U.S. Department of Education,

2015). The first year of college is pivotal for students to connect to the institution. Similarly, connection to a campus is significant in a student's attrition from their first year to the second (Hoffman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Retention Predictors and Strategies

Although there is no single predictor of retention, continual research efforts have focused on identifying the factors that contribute to student success and graduation prior to and after arriving in college (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Clark et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2006). Numerous studies have looked at retention, and many campuses have assessed and evaluated their policies, procedures, and programs to better understand the needs of students regarding persistence and graduation (Clark et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2006; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999). Some predictors for success prior to matriculation are level of academic preparedness, institutional environment, and personal characteristics (Clark et al., 2018; Keller & Lacy, 2013; Kim & Sax, 2007). Additionally, four of the greatest predictors of attrition are gender, grade point average (GPA), ACT/SAT scores, and race (Astin, 1997; Keller & Lacy, 2018). Moreover, strategies such as social and academic integration, first-year seminar courses, and increased faculty-student interaction can decrease attrition rates (Astin, 1997; Clark et al., 2018; Keller & Lacy, 2018; Reason, 2009). Several researchers have studied the importance of faculty-student interaction and its effects on persistence, retention, and overall satisfaction with students' collegiate experience (Glass et al., 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Faculty-Student Interaction

Connecting with a faculty member has a positive influence on satisfaction and retention (Cox et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and increased interaction with faculty is a predictor of persistence and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The significance of faculty-student interaction is particularly important for first-year students (Braxton, et al., 2004; Hoffman, 2014; Kuh, et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These interactions also have a positive correlation with areas such as intellectual and personal growth, scholarship, intellectual self-esteem, social activism, leadership, artistic inclination, and racial understanding (Astin, 1993; Cho & Auger, 2013; Cox et al. 2010; Glass et al., 2015). The literature related to college student outcomes suggests

that student background characteristics plus institutional factors, informal contact with faculty, and other collegiate experiences can influence academic performance, intellectual development, personal development, educational and career aspirations, college satisfaction, and institutional integration (Kim & Sax, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Despite a lack of literature surrounding the factors that connect students with faculty, some researchers have investigated the types of interactions most beneficial to students. Six types of conversations about topics of academic programs, career concerns, personal problems, intellectual or course-related matters, campus issues or problems, and informal socialization were found to be influential for students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The most salient of these six types of interactions were those that focused on intellectual and academic interests (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Personality differences and frequency of contact were also factors that contributed to meaningful faculty-student interactions and connection, thus influencing students' satisfaction and retention (Cho & Auger, 2013; Lamport, 1993; Reason, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although the effectiveness and importance of meaningful faculty-student interaction is evident, there is a need for research on the development of these influential connections between students and faculty (Cox et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2014; Kodama & Takesue, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The current study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach in order to understand the connection between students and faculty. To make meaning of this connection, an interpretive approach was applied (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Phenomenology is rooted in the understanding of constructionism; in essence, all meaning is constructed in relationship to objects or other persons. The aim of phenomenology is to identify and describe the subjective experience of the participant in regard to a phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). In this study, the participants reflected back on their first year of college and described their connection with a faculty member. This design allowed participants to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences with faculty. This research method operates within the framework of phenomenology, which aims to describe and understand the meaning of these experiences for multiple individuals around a topic (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003).

Sampling and Participants

Purposeful snowball sampling was used in this study to identify upper-division students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) who participated in an honors program during their first year at a large research institution in the southeast (Patton, 2002). The snowball method consists of one participant providing a few names of potential participants until an appropriate sample size is reached (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2002). In order for students to be eligible for the study, they needed to be an undergraduate enrolled at the university, to be currently in the honors program, and to have made a connection with a faculty member during their first year at the institution. The purpose of soliciting upper-division students was to ask participants about connections made during their first year at the institution. Six upper-division (i.e., sophomores, juniors, and seniors) students were interviewed (see Table 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

Each individual interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview technique in order to provide flexibility yet direct the interview within structured guiding questions (Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to describe a meaningful connection they made with a faculty member, and follow-up questions were asked when needed. A comparative method was used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method is used when one part of the data is taken and segmented, in this case coded. Then subsequent data are compared to the coding to either establish new relationships or continue to develop relevance (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Upon completion of the interviews, transcriptions were analyzed in relation to the previous interviews' codes. As part of a phenomenological study, data were analyzed

Table 1. Participant Matrix

Pseudonym	Gender	Year in School	Race/ Ethnicity	Major	Student Status
Marissa	Woman	Sophomore	White	English & Economics	U.S. Student
Jon	Man	Sophomore	Chinese	Accounting	U.S. Student
David	Man	Sophomore	Italian	Psychology	U.S. Student
Stephen	Man	Sophomore	Indian	Economics	U.S. Student
Tim	Man	Junior	White	Bio-Chemistry	International
Chris	Man	Sophomore	Asian	Pre-Med	U.S. Student

Note: Each of these items—gender, year, race/ethnicity, major, and student status—were self-reported by students.

for emergent themes by reducing participant responses through in vivo, axial, and thematic coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Although qualitative research does not seek to be generalizable, it can be considered trustworthy and particularisable (Merriam, 1998). In interpretive research, particularisability is achieved when aspects of the concrete cases under study can apply to other cases (Yin, 2014). Through triangulation techniques the researcher can enhance the transferability and particularisability of the data. I consulted the literature to determine if the responses of the participants aligned with existing literature regarding faculty-student interactions. Additionally, participants were invited to review and respond to transcript themes via member checks in order to increase trustworthiness. The method of peer debriefer was also used in this study. A peer debreifer is a professional peer who is knowledgeable about the subject matter and who can challenge the process and question interpretations of the findings (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The use of methodological triangulation enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings from this study.

FINDINGS

Findings from this study provide insight into how honors students establish connections with faculty. The information gleaned from the students' experiences fall into two main themes: approachability of faculty and motivation of students. Each theme was found consistently throughout each interview and provides a context for understanding how honors students connect with faculty at the university.

Approachability of Faculty

Although students had many types of interactions with faculty, participants specifically mentioned approachability of faculty as an important factor in the development of their connection. Approachability was experienced in formal, informal, and co-curricular interactions. When asked about a faculty member with whom he was connected, Tim, the only junior, responded this way:

> I wanted to talk to him about [his lecture] just because it was an interesting topic, and he seemed really nice [and] he made a lot of jokes

> . . . he's just a really nice guy. And he's very approachable, very open and he's a pretty funny guy. It's a very open or giving relationship . . . he's really encouraging and it's like he knows what you'd be good at.

This student echoed sentiments of the other participants regarding approachability. Stephen commented, "she just seemed approachable," and David remarked, "she was approachable and genuine, personable, and sincere." When asked what made the faculty member approachable, many of the participants described faculty who smiled, who did not take themselves too seriously, and who appeared friendly. Marissa mentioned that the faculty member she connected with was "just so approachable, and he's really friendly," and Chris remarked, "when faculty smile, it's like [he's] open to conversation or like he's open to interaction . . . so I basically go talk to him about stuff." While demeanor often made faculty seem more approachable to students, other types of interactions also cultivated the perceived approachability of the faculty.

One other factor in approachability was seeing the faculty in varying contexts. These students interacted with faculty in three ways: formal, informal, and co-curricular. Formal contacts occurred in the context of class or in programs offered through the honors program. Informal interactions occurred during lunch, office visits, or faculty mentoring. Finally, co-curricular interactions were defined as activities that were ongoing outside of the formal classroom and included research opportunities or student groups. Jon discussed one such interaction that resulted from the faculty's initiative and Jon's perception of the approachability of the faculty member.

> He was always very engaged in class and wanting to reach out to students [and] to interact with them. And over the course of the semester, we had some great classroom interaction and so outside of the classroom, [when I've been] walking and run into him, I stop and have a few moments of conversation. . . . And at the beginning of the semester he said, "you know, I've gone to lunch with students before," and I [thought], we should go.

Although the perceived approachability of the faculty member played a significant role in the initial connection students made with faculty, the faculty's actual approachability seemed to also contribute to their continued connection. Many of the students felt that both the honors and university faculty took genuine interest in them and were invested in their development both as students and individuals. While approachability was a quality that faculty

seemed to possess, other themes emerged that increased an understanding of how students made connections with faculty.

Student Motivation for Interaction

In identifying students' motivations for connecting with faculty, many responses indicated that students had personal and professional desires to connect with faculty. In most cases, these students approached faculty in order to have meaningful interactions. Marissa commented on her motivation for connecting with faculty:

> I guess [honors students have] probably got it engrained in ourselves that we need to make connections and networking, it's important, that's not the only reason I [approached him], I thought it'd be fun, and it was, but at the same time I do recognize that making connections with faculty is the way you're going to get ahead in research, get into classes that you really need later on, and such . . . it's good to make those connections.

Each participant mentioned a desire intrinsically or extrinsically to connect with faculty on some level. Chris stated, "Well, I reached out to him . . . and I am hoping to learn a lot from him." Stephen commented, "I'm fairly ambitious and knew at some point I'd need [a connection with a faculty] whether for recognition or scholarships, or applications." Each of the participants mentioned the connections with faculty being crucial to their success as students. "I feel like [my connections with faculty] have given me a more well-rounded experience here and they can be very helpful," said Jon.

Among the themes that emerged in the types of motivations for initiating a relationship with faculty, three main areas were identified: research possibilities, career and academic major planning advice, and networking opportunities. Research possibilities included students connecting through courses and brown bag lunches offered through the honors college in order to participate in research with faculty. Many of the students noted that connecting with faculty helped solidify or expand their way of thinking in regard to career or major possibilities. Jon mentioned, "after interacting with [this professor] and what-not, I'm a little more undecided because I realize there is a lot more I can do with this degree," and David added, "I now know if they can do it, I can do it because if they can find a niche, then maybe there is one for me too." Finally, students often discussed the need to connect with faculty in order to increase networking opportunities. Marissa mentioned the

process and selection criteria her student organization went through in order to select a faculty advisor.

> We ended up choosing someone, the person with the best kind of personality that seemed to have the most different subject knowledge and who we thought would be someone we could go out to lunch with and be around. For us, we think these things are important. And especially with as much as students have to network and have to go out and make the effort to get to know faculty and other people, it's really important to have a faculty advisor who cares about helping the students within their organization.

Although each student had multiple reasons for making faculty connections, every student was either personally or professionally motivated to make such connections.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study contribute to previous research on faculty-student interactions and also establish new ways of understanding the connections students have with faculty. The findings support the preexisting literature on retention and retention strategies for first-year students. Although there are many predictors of retention, research has noted that academic preparedness, institutional environment, and personal characteristics play a large role in retaining students from their first to second years of college (Astin, 1997; Hoffman, 2014). Academically high-achieving students who enroll in honors programs have some level of academic preparedness because GPA and SAT/ACT scores are usually required for admissions (Neumeister, 2004). Honors programs also seek to socialize students to the institutional environment and provide support for the rigor of the collegiate environment in terms of academic preparedness. Moreover, the honors program at this institution also provides students various opportunities to engage with faculty through brown bag lunches, lectures, and research opportunities. These opportunities create a welcoming institutional environment for honors students, and therefore these students are more likely to be retained (Cox et al., 2010; Digby, 2002; Kuh, et al., 2006).

Since all of the participants were upper-division students, their retention continues to support the literature. Findings from this study also support previous research on personal characteristics as predictors of retention (Astin,

1997; Glass et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2014). Participants were determined, motivated individuals seeking out opportunities for their continued growth and development. Although previous literature has discussed student motivation with regard to student success and retention, it falls short in addressing motivation in terms of faculty-student interactions. The findings from this study contribute to the literature regarding students' motivation to connect with faculty while at the same time continuing to support the idea that personal characteristics, such as student motivation, are a determinant of retention.

Another portion of the literature surrounding retention strategies concerns students' interaction with faculty. Connecting with a faculty member within the first year has been pivotal for student retention and satisfaction (Braxton et al., 2004; Cho & Auger, 2013; Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976). Each of the student participants described having what they felt was a meaningful connection with a faculty member during their first year at the institution. Additionally, previous literature shows that personality and frequency of meaningful interactions with faculty influence student retention and satisfaction (Lamport, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For the study participants, approachability was extremely important in the connections they made with faculty, which supports previous findings on faculty-student interaction and student retention.

There is a dearth of research on the approachability of faculty as an important factor in connections with students. Although approachability may appear to be common sense, it was a large contributor for students making meaningful connections with faculty. Additionally, defining approachability was often difficult for participants. While the definition was challenging for students, it may even be more difficult for faculty to understand how to enhance their approachability or accessibility (Cox et al., 2010; Cho & Auger, 2013). Moreover, many institutions, particularly research-extensive institutions, reward publications and research and do not often reward interactions with students. This lack of value is most readily evident in criteria for promotion and tenure, which stress research but rarely pedagogy or interaction with students. Therefore, faculty members have to see value for students in these interactions in order to initiate them. Faculty-student interaction can be incentivized, however, by providing financial resources to create informal interactions, thus aiding in the perceived approachability of faculty.

Student motivation, the second theme in the findings, has implications particularly within student service areas. Many faculty departments have staff members specifically designated to develop programs that encourage

interactions between faculty and students. Moreover, many student affairs practitioners attempt to involve faculty through programming to connect them with students in intentional ways. Therefore, partnering with these individuals provides programmatic opportunities. The potential benefits of these interactions, however, was more beneficial to students who developed their own connections than who made connections through programs. Therefore, promoting the benefits of these interactions through marketing, conversations, and networking will encourage and increase the likelihood of students' developing connections with faculty. This study may not have implications for all honors students at other kinds of institutions, but there are meaningful implications and transferability for honors students in general.

The current study showed that meaningful interactions between faculty and students foster a sense of connection. These interactions with faculty also increase students' satisfaction while in college. The information gleaned from the students' experiences should be used to help increase faculty/student interaction and decrease the attrition rates of college students.

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