Focus on Research

Essential Encounters:
Non-Classroom Interactions
Between Students and Faculty

Kristie DiGregorio
Northwestern University

Introduction

The literature predicts that students' non-classroom interactions with faculty can indeed become essential encounters, positively affecting student development. But much remains unknown about these encounters, specifically, what attracts students into these encounters and what transpires within the interactions to make them meaningful. Answering these questions has important implications for the summer session, which may create a climate with the unique potential to cultivate such contact. The purpose of this study is to begin to answer these questions to inform practice in the summer session and, indeed, throughout the undergraduate experience.

Literature Review

The summer session, sometimes treated as peripheral to the mission of the academy, may actually be the *locus* for actively engaging students in the learning process. Scott's (1993) comprehensive review of the literature found that learning outcomes for intensive summer session often surpass learning outcomes in traditional-length courses, regardless of the course format or field of study. Enhanced learning outcomes may be traced to the fact that, in intensive courses, students seemed to be uniquely engaged in their own learning. Students reported

that the reduced course load of the summer enhanced their concentration and focus on their learning, allowing them to "immerse themselves in the subject and develop a relationship with the material." Frequent class meetings of intensive courses fostered a more continuous learning process which facilitated connecting and synthesizing ideas and developing a richer understanding of the material. Students also reported that the compact nature of the courses demanded greater commitment or "mental investment" from them. The essential differences that students reported in summer courses was they felt a greater *connectedness* to their learning experience.

But as promising as it is, research on the classroom experience may be overlooking a key aspect of the summer session experience: out of classroom learning. The summer session administrator who aspires to catalyze student learning through careful curricular planning and course development may be surprised to discover that his or her planning focuses on an area where students spend a *minority* of their time. Approximately one third of college students' waking hours are spent in class or studying. Hence, students find themselves with roughly 70 hours of discretionary time each week or 560 hours of unaccounted for time during an eight-week summer session (Boyer, 1987). Not surprisingly, it has been estimated that more than 70 percent of student learning occurs outside of the classroom (Wilson, *et. al.*, 1975), and the literature on how college affects students has consistently traced informal interaction with faculty to the epicenter of this out-of-classroom learning. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of the literature on how college affects students found that, even after controlling for students' pre-enrollment characteristics, there were statistically significant associations between the amount of informal non-class contact with faculty and outcomes such as, "perceptions of intellectual growth during college, increases in intellectual orientation, liberalization of social and political values, growth in autonomy and independence, increases in interpersonal skills, gains in general maturity and personal development, educational aspirations and attainment, and orientation toward scholarly careers" (p. 620).

In *What Matters in College,* the culmination of a 30-year study of hundreds of thousands of college students, Astin (1993) identified student-faculty interaction as among the factors that matter most in college. He found that activities such as being a guest in a professor's home, talking with faculty outside of class, and assisting with a faculty member's research have "substantial positive correlations with all areas of student satisfaction, including quality of instruction, individual support services, and the overall college experience" (Astin, 1993, 383).

Astin's findings discovered similar comprehensive effects of these interactions, with the benefits extending to each aspect of students' self-reported intellectual and personal growth, to various personality and attitudinal outcomes, to every self-rated ability except physical health, orientation to diversity and social change, and to behavior outcomes such as tutoring peers, being elected to student offices, and participating in campus events.

Despite the preponderance of evidence for the power of informal interaction with faculty to affect student growth, these relationships are not necessarily naturally-occurring; they require substantial effort from faculty and students because many factors discourage their development. Surprisingly, Fairweather's (1993) study found a "dominance of research-oriented reward structures for most U.S. colleges and universities, regardless of institutional type or mission." And Astin (1993) found that the research orientation of faculty correlates negatively with their student orientation. In fact, one in every four students indicated that he or she could not identify one person who took a personal interest in his or her academic progress (Carnegie, 1990). Similarly, students are often intimidated from engaging faculty in conversation beyond the walls of the classroom (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, *et. al.*, 1991). However, the literature indicates that when contact is established beyond the classroom, students play a key role as initiators of these relationships (Tampke; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, *et. al.*).

Summer session administrators may find themselves in a situation unique to the regular school year: because of the brevity of the term, efforts to cultivate student-faculty interaction outside the classroom must be intense and fast-acting. Is it possible? The literature suggests that not only is it possible, but it may be even more likely in the summer. Scott (1993) discovered that students in intensive summer courses felt "the student-teacher relationship was closer" than in academic-year courses. A summer schedule of fewer, more condensed courses afforded faculty and students a sense of focus not common of the academic year. Students' general desire to "connect to the learning process" included connecting with the instructor. Scott concludes, "In short, students wanted to be important to their instructors."

Research Questions

One important question that remains unanswered by the research on these important interactions is, "What attracts students into informal interactions with faculty outside the classroom?" In other words, "What factors help dissolve the initial barriers to interaction to allow students to "connect" with their instructor? How are the connections

made between students and faculty? Specifically, what attracts students into informal interaction with faculty? Once in these interactions, what are students' experiences? A better understanding of the factors that encourage such connections will inform summer session administrators how they might catalyze their development.

A second unanswered question is, "What are the qualities of student-faculty interactions that make them so influential in students' experiences of college?" The work of Astin, Pascarella, and Terenzini has illustrated the power of faculty interaction to affect student outcomes and has convincingly argued that these relationships warrant further study. The students' experience of these interactions has not been explored in depth. A better understanding of the most powerful qualities of student-faculty interaction can guide the development of criteria against which to measure new initiatives and suggest ways to enhance and expand current practices.

Research Design

Qualitative methods seem well suited to beginning to explore unanswered questions about students' non-classroom interactions with faculty. Quantitative studies assessing the impact of student-faculty interaction on students presume to describe *outcomes* for students whose *input* was similar. In contrast, the goal of qualitative research is to describe in fuller detail the middle step, the environment, with a particular focus on students' experience of that middle step. So, the topic for inquiry shifts from the end product of college experiences to students' assessments and interpretations of the actual experiences.

The setting for the study was a medium-size research institution that established living and learning residence halls in the 1970s in an effort to bridge the perceived gulf between faculty and students. Since students in the living and learning centers were presumed to have at least a moderate amount of experience from which to draw, all eight respondents were former or current student officers within such a center. Students' self-reports indicated that they interacted informally with faculty at least as much as their peers, and usually more than their peers. In accordance with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) emphasis on maximum variation sampling, students were selected to represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, undergraduate schools, class years, and living and learning centers.

The primary form of data collection was through in-depth and semi-structured phenomenological interviews during the Spring and Fall of 1994 (Kvale, cited in Attinasi, 1992). Students were asked to reflect on their experiences with faculty by describing specific events and reflect-

ing on the immediate and cumulative impact of those events. The study defined informal student-faculty interactions as "any interactions of at least 15 minutes in length during office hours, as a continuation of class discussion, in an advising session, at a departmental event, in the students' residence hall, etc."

For the current study, Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) concepts of "unitizing" and "conceptualizing" occurred simultaneously. As each transcript was reviewed line-by-line, meaningful comments (units) were noted about factors encouraging students to engage with faculty members outside of class and about students' experiences of those interactions. With each successive unit identified, constant comparison was employed: it was tested for fit with existing categories, and in the absence of a fit, a new category was established. Categories were narrowly defined, presuming that redundant categories could be combined later in the process. Gradually, overarching categories began to emerge, into which several codes could be grouped. When all of the interviews had been coded, each was reviewed a second time with the complete list of codes to insure consistency and to apply newer codes to interviews analyzed early in the process.

Frequencies were calculated for each code. Noteworthy findings included codes for which the number of students mentioning the phenomenon and/or the number of times the phenomenon was mentioned appeared to be high relative to the other codes. To insure the rigor of the study, Lincoln's and Guba's standards for trustworthiness were used which emphasize credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion
Barriers

One of the most startling findings of the present study relates to the gulf between faculty and student subcultures. The surprise comes not in the existence of the gulf, for the research foreshadowed that the faculty reward structure and students' initial hesitation would challenge the development of student-faculty relationships. The surprise comes in the *depth* and *breadth* of the expanse. That it should be described as such by the current sample seemed unlikely: all of the respondents reported that their quantity of interaction with faculty was above average. But a senior talked about a "structure" that functioned as a brick wall might: "It's impositions of the other structure that sometimes I don't think I can get over…It's just the structure that's imposed I think at the beginning of my freshman year when I walked into Modern Philosophy, my first class in Tech Auditorium going,

'There's 400 kids here who can't all talk to the professor'…Overall, I think the process is difficult unless maybe you come in with more of a networking attitude. There's barriers there that don't come down." As a senior, one student had trouble determining the cause of the "huge distance" between students and faculty: "They stand up front, we sit down, we take notes. That's it. It's just sort of, I don't know how it sort of develops, it just is…You just sort of jump to college and there's a huge distance. And it takes a fair amount of effort on both parts to get rid of that distance. It's a pretty strong thing."

Authority

Students identified several sources for these barriers between students and faculty. First, students' sense of the faculty members as authorities presented an initial barrier to students engaging faculty beyond the classroom. Every student in the sample ascribed a sense of authority to his or her professors where the faculty role centers on *answers,* and the student role centers on *questions*. This seems particularly accentuated in the sciences where a student commented: "[Engineering professors] really have a bigger role as teachers. Like, 'You don't know how to do this, I'll show you how…' So, I think, as a student, I go in with a lot more questions and a lot less answers" Every college student has had extensive exposure to "teachers" but the authority of "faculty" is somehow distinct: "In high school, you have pretty close contact with your teachers…But then in college you just for some reason get this huge distance, and I don't know if it's the size of the class that does it or if it's the aura or that they're like intellectual scholars…It's just a different level that I hadn't really thought of until now."

Time

Another source of the barriers between students and faculty is time: Students are exceedingly aware of how precious faculty time is. Students perceive a certain urgency among the faculty, the likely result of the conflicting demands of teaching and research. The implication is that informal interaction with faculty is a low priority. So, in addition to their roles as authority figures, faculty must dispel students' belief that faculty have no time for students. "I have had professors that I thought, 'Oh, this is such a great class' or 'This is very cool,' and haven't found the way maybe—I think it stems from their time is so precious or their office hours are only once a week and that's it…And I think professors unfortunately reinforce that mostly through their time, making students aware how valuable their time is."

Fear

Not surprisingly, students described a generalized fear of engaging with faculty outside the classroom. Interestingly, the students' descriptions of this fear seemed to differ by gender. All of the men noted being intimidated by faculty with whom they interacted, compared to half of the women. Women share the fear of engaging faculty, but their fear takes a different form, one that reflects more on the *student* than on the faculty member. All of the women's comments about intimidation suggested the fear of seeming not smart enough. Only one man expressed such a fear. One of the women, who was admitted into the institution's joint B.S./Ph.D. program as a high school senior, remarked "So, that's what I expected, that he would just pretty much tell me that I was clueless and say, 'Come back in a year,' which wouldn't be that out of line." Interestingly, reflecting on the same conversation, her advisor later told her, "'You know, the program is really irrelevant, because had you come to my office on the first day and told me all the stuff that you did, I probably would have let you be in my lab anyway.'"

This confirms that, at least in this students' case, her fear was unfounded. Women's fears of not being smart enough are reminiscent of reports that, even with higher grades than their male counterparts, women come to college with lower expectations of themselves (Halner, cited in Whitt, 1994).

Just Cause

Possibly as a result of the interpersonal dynamic established by faculty members' roles as authorities and the sense that they have little time for students outside the classroom, students feel that they must establish *just cause* for taking the faculty members' time. With only one exception, every student noted that engaging a faculty member during office hours must be justified by students' having a problem. One student shared her approach to office hours, "I always have my questions prepared, because I don't want to feel like I'm wasting their time if I go in there and I'm like, 'Oh, I just wanted to talk.'" A man confirmed this student's sense that office hours do not provide a forum for forging a relationship with a faculty member, "Nobody wants to take up [a nationally-known professor's] time (laughs) to go and talk to him about something you already understand just so he gets to know you." Even a student for whom his most "meaningful relationships are in office hours," seemed to require extraordinary justification to initiate contact, "The first time that I went to [his] office hours because I'd gotten a B on a paper, which is fine, then I got a B+ and I was like, 'Yes!' And then I got a C and I was like, 'Oh!' So, it was time to go in and talk to him."

Strategies

While the students' comments often focused on *barriers,* they also described how relationships formed despite the barriers, which suggest multiple *strategies* for overcoming the conditions that challenge the formation of student-faculty relationships.

Environmental Strategies

In students' descriptions of their most meaningful interactions with faculty, a consensus emerged about environments that helped dissolve the barriers to informal interaction: small classes, conferences to discuss class projects, and formal connections such as being involved in a living and learning center or working for a faculty member. As noted, large classes often cement such barriers, as one student explained: "There's 400 kids in here who can't all talk to the professor." Explaining why he felt comfortable talking to a faculty member outside of class, another student noted the effect of two environmental strategies: "I think it had to do with it was a class of 15 people...so already she's going to know my name just from that. Plus...every time we wrote a paper we had to go have a personal conference with her on the paper and so there you go. It's interaction, there's a purpose to it."

Once in the environment of a small class or conference, there is tremendous potential for the interaction to be meaningful: "One of the most memorable interactions that I had with faculty would be that one session when I went to her, it was again talking about what topic you would do for the end-of-the-term paper. But we got to talking about what I was going to do after I graduated because she was interested because I was a foreign student." Small classes, conferences and formal connections to faculty are indigenous to higher education, but perhaps the barriers to interactions with faculty seemed more salient in students' experience because students find themselves in such environments only occasionally.

Individual Strategies

Interested Faculty. Simply by expressing an interest in students, their lives and activities, faculty members made tremendous strides toward dissolving the barrier between faculty and student subcultures. The faculty member's expressed interest in the student was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons students cited for the development of relationships. For example, one student described the magnetism of this interest, "And then once they're the kind of faculty that generally genuinely want to get to know undergraduates, it's going to be real hard

not to get to know them." Two categories that emerged within the theme of faculty interest were an interest in students' personal lives, and the faculty member asking questions of the student. Combining both of these qualities, one student's most meaningful relationship started with a simple question, "And she just asked, 'Oh, what was the interview for?' She didn't care about anything talking about class. She was great. And from that point on, I felt totally that the one little thing…very rarely do I have professors ask me about what's going on with me or where are you heading or what are you interested in or what was this all about." This expression of interest accomplishes several things. Most notably, it communicates that faculty do have time for students, a matter not of quantity but of priority. "[With] Professor D. there was a job to do when I came in there but there were other things to discuss. Even when she had appointments every fifteen minutes and there were people waiting outside, she could politely say, "You know, A., I would love to have you sit and talk, but there are people outside." Expression of interest begins to introduce the personal which, in turn, dissolves the constraints of the formal roles of student and teacher. Furthermore, when faculty ask questions of students, they challenges the assumption that *students* ask the questions *and faculty* have the answers, thus challenging faculty members' roles as authorities.

Intellectual Discussions. Perhaps the most important thing for which a faculty member can ask a student is his or her opinion. In fact, discussion of intellectual topics seems to represent a transition in office hours from interacting through the roles of "teacher" and "student" to interacting in spite of that hierarchy. Half of the sample reported discussions of intellectual topics: "We don't talk about how's the weather…We talk about issues which stimulate my mind, because I could easily go and talk about sports all day, but we talk about the Romantic period in Germany, paralleling that to Classicism in Germany. We talk about the Middle Ages. We talk about European affairs, how the Germans related to the French, to the English, to the Americans, Clinton's health care plan, paralleling that to the way the Germans approach health care."

There were indications that initiation for these interactions was mutual: one-half of the students reported their own intellectual curiosity as among the reasons they initiated contact with faculty, and one-half reported faculty openness to students' opinions among the reasons they initiated contact. Asked what effect a student's interactions with faculty had on him, the student replied, "It's kind of made me realize that these people are interested in what I have to say." Another student

continued, "They strike you in such a way that they're interested in student opinions maybe in their classes more....So I think that initially gets me to want to go to office hours or to want to discuss things with professors more."

Nurturing Faculty. All of the students reported what may be termed "nurturing" qualities from faculty: support or encouragement, approval or endorsement, empathy and warmth. Even a small indication of concern for a student is not lost on undergraduates. "There's a more genuine concern about the students, I think is the biggest thing...You feel confident or like you can go out and do something." For some of the students, this support offers an important reservoir: "So, I would go in and talk to him about it and he would just make me feel so much better. He would talk about how he felt at the University of Chicago where people read Goethe instead of the comics."

Interactions Transition to Relationships

While the barriers between students and faculty may be formidable, they are not impenetrable: nearly all of the students reported moving from *interactions* to *relationships*. With the exception of one student, all of the subjects reported having a significant relationship with more than one faculty member. When asked to identify their most important faculty member, some students found the question difficult: "Well, it's like asking, 'Who's your best friend?'"

Every student reported at least one and as many as nine encounters with faculty where the boundary between their shared academic world and their individual personal worlds began to dissolve. One aspect of meaningful interactions for students was when faculty shared personal information, e.g., about their family, etc. "I think over this past year I did become more than just a student; it went from just a student-faculty relationship to more of a friendship kind of thing with one of my profs. I guess the whole interaction was shaped by the fact that I was looking for a topic to work on, but my conversation with her forced me to think about what was important to me and why I wanted to do some real work on it. So we brought up things like family values, what I want in my own family in the future, that kind of thing."

Analysis suggested that the impetus for the development of students' friendships with faculty came from both students and faculty. Every subject reported at least one occasion when he or she initiated contact with faculty outside the classroom. Encouragingly, all of the students were able to recount examples when faculty took the initiative to get to know students by showing an interest in them; most students

shared more than one example. Nearly all of the students reported examples when faculty made themselves available and/or presented themselves as approachable.

Roles Become Invisible

Whether in office hours or in the living and learning center, the key is moving to a level where students and faculty are comfortable enough to move outside their roles as faculty and students so that they "can talk about anything." Not surprisingly, dissolving the classroom hierarchy inspires students' sense of equality with their faculty. The initial stage seems to be discovery of similarities, finding that faculty experiences are not so alien to students' own experience. "I was interested in seeing how her life growing up Catholic was the same as mine. In a lot of ways we were brought up very similarly. And it was like she went to an all-girls' school and I went to an all-girls' school and we had strict parents, dating was a problem. I guess you could say she was the first bonding I ever had with a faculty and it was something common between us, so that's really important I guess."

The final goal is a signal from the faculty that is internalized by the student that they can interact at the same level, "There's not that gap, the gap has been bridged where you're an equal to them. Obviously, we're not equals in the amount of knowledge of German history, culture, language, but we are equals in the sense that we're adults and we're here in an intellectual community to learn about German."

Benefits for Students

There were substantial benefits that accrued to students once their relationships with faculty reached this level.

Growth

As students reflected on their encounters with faculty, they had moving testimonials of how those interactions impacted their lives. Many of the students reported that an interaction drew something out of them, tapping previously undiscovered potential: "She really brought out something in me that, I don't know, it hasn't been done. I started actually writing poetry that I liked in her class."

Confidence

Relatedly, several students testified to how their interactions instilled in them a sense of confidence. For example, one student reflected, "I mean, it's helped me to gain more confidence that I can interact with people on this level." Another student talked about a significant faculty

member who was her research advisor: "I probably got a lot bigger ego having him as my research advisor because he really made sure I knew of all the options."

Fearlessness

Perhaps the most important outcome of student-faculty interaction is that it makes future interactions between students and faculty likely. Once students and faculty initiate contact, they seem to be engaged in a process that is self-reinforcing. With the exception of two, students reported that their encounters with faculty encouraged them to have more encounters.

Limitations

Limitations of the present study are suggestive of paths for future inquiry. Scott (1993) raises some intriguing questions about whether intensive summer session courses offer a richer context for encouraging student-faculty interaction. For example, students' sense that faculty have little time to spend with undergraduates may be less salient during the summer term when lighter course loads allow faculty sufficient time to meet the conflicting demands of teaching and research. Future inquiry should assess whether students' greater connectedness with summer faculty extends beyond the classroom and facilitates informal interaction between students and faculty in a qualitatively different way than during the academic year. If so, are there long-term affects that may impact the barriers described in this study?

More generally, it may be argued that the findings are idiosyncratic to the more involved students. But, as Wilson (1975) argues, "interaction [between students and faculty], because it is a two way process, does not depend solely on the attitudes or behavior patterns of students" (p. 166). These findings do offer insight into institutional and faculty characteristics that encourage or discourage interaction between students and faculty. However, by focusing on the student perspective, the study does fail to capture fully faculty or administration influences on the invisible tapestry of institutional culture. Future inquiry would benefit from assessing these perspectives.

In future studies, it would be also be valuable to further triangulate the data by expanding the sample to include students not living in the living and learning centers, to incorporate quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires, and to sample from a larger group of students from multiple colleges and universities.

Conclusions

Perhaps one of the most important findings of the study is that discovering why students *do not* initiate contact with faculty may be primary to finding out why they *do*. If, as other research suggests, students are the initiators of student-faculty informal interaction, then this study provides vital information about how that initiative is frustrated by the unanticipated barriers that students encounter.

Though the present study draws from academic year experiences, there are multiple implications for the summer session. Considering the extensive barriers to student-faculty interaction outside the classroom, the summer session administrator might again raise the question of whether it's possible to facilitate such interaction within the brevity of the summer term. That summer session students reported closer student-teacher relationships in class suggests that intensive summer classes may dissolve some of the barriers that are more tenacious in the academic year environment. And interactions begun in the summer may accelerate the development of relationships during the academic year.

The fact that essential encounters between students and faculty often require the encouragement of environments such as small classes and conferences to discuss class projects can inform the summer course design process, highlighting the potential advantage of small classes characteristic of summer session in which tutorial-style teaching is possible. Students also remarked that formal connections such as working for the faculty member encourage the development of meaningful relationships. That summer is the time when many faculty return to their research suggests a symbiotic benefit of encouraging faculty to invite students to assist with their research. The relaxed environment of the summer may also facilitate the individual strategies identified: interested, nurturing faculty willing to engage in discussions of intellectual topics. Non-classroom events such as cultural field trips and fireside discussions help students and faculty discover similarities which the respondents identified as an important bridge between student and faculty subcultures. One student shared how finding such similarities "can definitely stand out." Student affairs professionals who are skilled in developing these types of non-classroom learning opportunities are key allies in building such bridges.

That the students' interactions with faculty were self-reinforcing, encouraging further interactions is perhaps the most promising finding of the study, suggesting that administrators need only provide the starting point for these interactions, that efforts to create environmental incentives may bring exponential return on their efforts. The irony

is that it only takes a small crack in the "barriers" to allow meaningful interaction to occur. As noted, one student's most meaningful interaction began with a simple question, "'Oh, what was the interview for?...that one little thing...very rarely do I have professors ask me about what's going on with me." This same student also emphasized that the quality of the interaction was most important even if the duration of the interaction was brief. While meaningful student-faculty *relationships* may be uncommon in the summer session, meaningful student-faculty *interactions* need not be.

This study raises an important question for the summer session administrator: What messages are they sending to faculty and students about the availability and importance of learning that extends beyond the classroom walls? Based on the outcomes that are suggested by this study, there may be no better outcome for summer session administrators than to have personal growth, enhanced confidence, and sparked intellectual curiosity among the students' reports of "What I did for my summer vacation."

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