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The Impact Professors Have on College Students

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Abstract

It is known that university students are significantly influenced by their professors. This review article surveys relevant research on the impact that professors actually have on students, which of their behaviors are important in creating that impact, and which behaviors professors may want to adopt, or enhance, in order to maximize the positive effect they have in their classes.

Keywords: professors, university students, motivation, caring, engagement, faculty- student interaction

> *"While in college, students may see their faculty members as the experts in their field of study and may value their opinion, knowledge, and expertise. Whereas previously they may have relied on parents or other family members for professional guidance, they now have another resource they can draw on, their faculty members... Hence, students who perceive their faculty members as being approachable and are able to engage them in conversation outside the immediate classroom could likely benefit career-wise. Students could possibly come away feeling more confident, motivated, and interested in performing well. Some faculty members may not realize the extent to which their informal interactions with students could potentially be associated with students' self-confidence, motivation, and performance"*
>
> *(Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya, 2010; p. 340).*

Uusiautti and Maatta (2013) indicated that ours is a time when increasing demands on efficient and productive higher education are placed, and student drop out is on the rise. They pose the question of how to make university students' academic experience such, that they succeed in their studies and complete their degrees, at least undergraduate ones. Professors, they argue, are front and center in that endeavour. The impact that professors have on students is firstly indicated by retention rates. Olson and Carter (2014) reported on a survey of 313 students in a 4-year university which found that, in general, students' retention rate was significantly increased when students perceived faculty as genuinely caring about them (see also Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Similarly, Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004) found that caring, accessible and dedicated full time faculty were very important for retention.

Cruce, Wolniak, Seifer, and Pascarella (2006) suggested that good practices in education have a positive impact on students' development and engagement. Student-faculty interaction is a meaningful and important factor in students' academic and social success in university. Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya (2010) indicated a crucial ingredient in developing university students' academic self-concept as well as enhancing their motivation is the type and quality of student-teacher interactions. For instance, Faculty members who are interested in their students' academic progress, seem to make significant contributions in increasing their intellectual development (Cokley, 2000; Rosenthal et al, 2000). Those teacher-student interactions are particularly significant when they occur informally, increase students motivation, they remain engaged in class activities, and are actively involved in the learning process, and such an interaction has been identified as a primary agent of college culture, and has an important influence on the attitudes, interests, and values of college students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Thompson, 2001). Research found that student-faculty member relationship is more meaningful in predicting the social-emotional functioning of students than their academic performance (Decker, Dona, and Christenson, (2007). This implies that there is a support-seeking dimension in student–faculty relationships that can be carefully nurtured to shape positive outcomes for students. Informal interactions, outside of the classroom, or mentoring provided by faculty to students who transition into college, maybe even more important for their

emotional and social wellbeing than peer support (Pascarella and Terinzini, 2005; Shore, 2003). Such student-faculty positive and nourishing interactions contribute to greater satisfaction with academic life, lesser likelihood of dropping out, and students feeling more intellectually driven (Hazler and Carney, 1993). Further, students are more likely to have a sense of purpose and competence in succeeding in college if their interactions with faculty are meaningful (Martin, 2000), they report greater learning and satisfaction with college and enhanced personal and intellectual development as a result of positive informal interactions with faculty members (Lamport, 1993). And inversely, students who perceive their faculty members as being less interested in them or in their learning seem to also report feeling discouraged and apathetic (Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya, 2010).

Types of student-faculty interactions, and who seeks them

Hagenauer and Volet (2014) have addressed what they termed TSR, meaning Teacher -Student Relationship and identified two main dimensions of this type of relationship: the *affective* dimension, which includes honesty, trust and respect and which describes the bond built between students and teachers forming the basis for secure and affective positively experienced relationships, and the *support* dimension, including respectful approach, trustworthiness, safe atmosphere, and fairness which describes the support that must be provided through TSR for students' success at university (see also Larsen, 2015).

Glass et al. (2015) indicated that an actual or possible change in one's relationships has the potential to evoke powerful emotions, which in the case of social inclusion may include such positive affects as calmness, anticipation, trust or joy (see Plutchik, 2011 for a review). We need to remind ourselves that the need to belong, the desire for frequent positive Interactions, and the wish to feel cared for by others is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and thus students and faculty interactions are inevitable and the resultant personal connections that emerge through advisement and mentoring are highly valued by all (Light, 2001). Students respond, mainly, to implicit and nonverbal cues and are consequently more drawn to interact with faculty members whom they perceive to be sociable, intelligent, showing leadership, supportive, and objective (Babad, Avni-Babad, and Rosenthal, 2003; Furnham and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2005). Micari and Pasoz (2012) highlighted the importance of developing rapport and respect between faculty members and students, and asserted that it can be done in, both, verbal and nonverbal ways such as making eye contact, using humor and personal examples during lectures, and interacting with students outside of class. For instance, faculty members who allow their students to use their first name when they interact with them, are commonly perceived as sociable, intelligent, showing leadership, support, and objectivity (McDowell and Westman, 2005). Faculty may interact with students formally in class, informally out of class, or it could take on a more intense flavor in a tutorial style classroom, where a faculty member may meet with a small number of students for up to an hour. Such close, intense, interaction have been shown to enhance student learning and intellectual stimulation, with both students and faculty valuing the opportunity to get closer on an informal personal level (Smallwood, 2002).

Cox and Orehovec (2007) identified four major types of student–faculty interactions with the most important one, *functional interaction*s which are basically academically related interactions occurring outside of the classroom. Next were *personal interactions*, dealing with personal issues, *incidental contact* which is expressed by occasional acknowledgement and greetings, and the fourth kind of interaction is *disengagement* which involves minimal student-faculty interaction in the classroom, and no interpersonal exchange.

Research indicates that mainly females seek interaction with faculty and usually report them to be positive (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, and Fillpot, 2000). Interestingly, Asian and South African students seem to have more positive perceptions of faculty with strict and even admonishing interaction and teaching styles (Evans and Fisher, 2000). Moreover, the more demanding those faculty members are, the more these two student populations seem to learn and benefit (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004).

Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya (2010) indicated that the most meaningful and influential interaction is the informal one that students and faculty may have outside of the classroom. Students who perceive their faculty to be approachable, respectful, and available for frequent are more likely to report being confident of their academic skills and show greater motivation to study and develop, both intrinsically and extrinsically. These students are also more likely to find the learning process enjoyable and stimulating.

Uusiautti and Maatta (2013) found in their study that love, the deep caring of others which can be seen as a virtue or strength representing human kindness, compassion, and affection produces freedom, empowers and is vital to enhancing students' self-efficacy. When instructors exhibit love, forgiveness and trust in their relationship with students, it directly translates into satisfaction, commitment and loyalty (Prewitt, 2003; see also Rego et al., 2011).

Teacher's behaviors that can influence students

"Research on caring demonstrates that when students perceive their teachers as caring, their grades and behavior are positively influenced" [Miller, 2008; Abstract]. Research indicated that faculty can positively influence students' self-efficacy, and instructors' characteristics are major players in developing students' interest (Krapp, 2002; Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia and Tauer, 2008). Research demonstrates the significance of a teacher's interpersonal communication practices, such as immediacy, verbal and nonverbal communication (Song, Kim and Luo, 2016), self-disclosure (Cayanus, Martin and Goodboy, 2009), and other communicator's style such as humor (Micari and Pasoz, 2012) on learning experiences of students. Immediacy has been shown to particularly reduce social and psychological distance between people and it positively affects students' motivation to study. It was further found that an instructor's emphasis on developing interpersonal relationships through the use of immediacy behaviors operates as an essential factor in facilitating effective learning experiences (see Graham, West and Schaller, 1992; Stoltz and Bryant, 2013). The act of self-disclosure (SD), it was found, is a fundamental starting point in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis, 1993). Self-disclosure increases linking and encourages intimacy (Collins and Miller, 1994). Teacher SD is defined as "conscious and deliberate disclosures about one's self, aspects of one's professional practice, world or personal views, personal history, and responses to ongoing classroom events" (Rasmussen and Mishna, 2008, p. 192). While self-disclosure is not an integral part of the curriculum, some teachers share their education/personal background, previous experiences, and opinions to clarify or illustrate class content more effectively (Cayanus and Martin, 2008; Hosek and Thompson, 2009). Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya (2010) found that when faculty members are approachable, respectful and available for frequent interaction outside of the classroom, students are more confident in their academic skills and report both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Student engagement is essential to learning. The role of the college instructor in student engagement cannot be trivialized (Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005). Student learning, retention and a quality undergraduate experience result from student engagement (Mantooth, 2011). Such quality undergraduate instruction builds on active learning, prompt feedback, collaboration and out of class contact with faculty. Humor can be used to engage students. Humor is effective at gaining students' attention and holding their interest (Deiter, 2000; Mantooth, 2011). Humor affects students physically and psychologically. Physically, it relaxes muscles, stimulates circulation, improves respiration, relieves the body's stress, empowers the immune system and lowers pulse rate and blood pressure (Berk, 2002). Humor also affects students psychologically in that it decreases anxiety, stress and tension, improves self-esteem, and increases curiosity, comprehension (Garner, 2006; Philaretou, 2006; Stambor 2006). Humor also increases instructor immediacy, which is the perceived distance between an instructor and the students. Humor creates a classroom that is open to student participation, facilitates learning, and builds cohesion among the students (Burbach & Babbitt, 1993; Garner, 2006). "Humor has been shown to stimulate creativity, create positive learning environments, help students retain and comprehend information, encourage class attendance, engage students in the learning process, and facilitate a connection between the instructor and the student" (Mantooth, 2011; p. 6).

Faculty positive impact on students: Caring behaviors

Teven and McCroskey (1997) found that educators' behaviors significantly impact students' behavioral patterns. The more students feel that their instructors care about them, the more likely they are to care about the class and consequently attend more regularly. Some tips on how faculty can increase their positive impact on students were provided by Olson and Carter (2014) who highlighted the importance of faculty's *caring* approach on students. In order to convey caring, they recommended adopting a stance of always serving students and indicating that it is actually a pleasure to do so. Making culturally-considerate eye contact, smiling warmly, and inviting the student to share his concerns. Providing undivided attention in the moment is quite powerful in demonstrating our caring for the individual. Providing positive feedback to students, indicates not only faculty's caring but may also enhance their ability to think and write critically. One way professors can instill *confidence* in their students, is to make a special effort to encourage creativity and freethinking by being open to new ideas and providing constructive criticism, rather than criticism that would deflate a student's confidence.

Fostering Openness and Accessibility - even the manner in which the faculty's office is set up can convey caring. Sitting close to the student, rather than with a large desk between them, conveys openness and accessibility, rather than distance and closeness.

Unconditional positive regard - Just like in psychotherapy, acceptance of the student and his/her performance is of utmost importance. And so, the faculty need to approach students with the belief that each of them has the

competence to study, produce written work, and complete the degree. The student will perceive it and feel encouraged and empowered by it.

Faculty who trust that their students are capable, *set high but achievable expectations*. Caring for students includes careful consideration of desired learning outcomes and development of manageable academic tasks that gradually move the students toward successful completion of those learning outcomes.

Faculty can have a significant impact on students' confidence level. Instilling in students the ability to think independently, critically and creatively, and solve methodological and applied problems, need themselves to be open to new ideas, encourage independent thinking, and provide positive feedback.

Acting as an appropriate adult model - faculty members can serve as appropriate models for their students in becoming responsible people, who display pro social behavior. That can be done by modeling to students of professional boundaries, ethical responsibilities and honesty.

Keeping response times short - students need, and contact their instructors, mostly via e-mail or phone calls. Getting back to students within 24 hours indicates that their concern is valued, and that the instructor made an effort to find time, and respond to them quickly. Similarly, providing rapid evaluative feedback is important for the same reasons, i.e. that faculty appreciates the work that the student invested in his work, and knows that the student is anxiously waiting for the comments and the grade that the faculty has the power to assign.

To conclude, Olson and Carter (2014) point out that "Call it 'accessibility,' 'approachability,' 'respect,' 'enthusiasm', and so forth, but the bottom line is, "What students still want most is *us*" (Groth, 2007, p. 41). Moreover, students need "us" to display unconditional positive regard and the multitude of other behaviors one categorizes as "caring." If we are to make a difference, and promote retention and success, students need to know that we care about them, both inside and outside of the classroom" (p. 8).

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