Build the Bridge to Better Faculty-Student Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education grapple with low retention rates, and the rates for community colleges are even lower. Historically, students are blamed for their low academic performance. The other barriers to academic success typically include financial reasons, transportation issues, or lack of motivation. However, taking a hard look at the institution's role is also important. Institutional barriers come in the form of navigational concerns and access to resources.

In the literature, the importance of faculty-student relationships is well documented. However, not all academic faculty interact with students outside formal instruction. Informal faculty-student relationships can impact students' academic outcomes. Of note, the area of course retention research outside of online studies is sparse, but recently in the literature, course retention is viewed as a possible missing link in understanding low college retention rates.

Applying Pascarella's (1980) informal faculty-student contact model as the analysis framework, the results from interviewing nine community college faculty members and three students from high retention courses at the largest college in Nevada, along with Pascarella and Terenzini's (1985) student-faculty contact scale student questionnaire responses (n = 67), indicate patterns in how and why faculty and students informally interact with their students. The findings show alignment between faculty and students with Pascarella's (1980) model in all four areas: context, exposure, focus, and impact. Further, two additional themes emerged that, to the researcher's knowledge, are not previously explored in the literature: professional/personal boundaries and the location of the contact, including off-campus, coffee, and lunchtime. This

study provides some underexplored considerations in the complex issue of improving retention rates.

Statement of the Problem

Low retention in community colleges is problematic (Levesque 2018, Tinto, 2017). Less than four out of 10 students complete a community college degree or certificate within six years (Bailey, 2015). Low retention in community colleges is a national crisis and an unwarranted burden on students, faculty, college administrators, taxpayers, and community members.

College course retention is associated with the likelihood of completing a degree (Hutto, 2017). However, there is a lack of research exploring in-person course retention and student success. Course retention literature primarily focuses on online course retention because of exceptionally low retention rates. Recently, course retention was explained as the "missing link" in studying retention factors (Li et al., 2022).

College "faculty have a significant role in determining the success of students," yet the "new faculty majority," which are part-time instructors, "general[ly] lack understanding around faculty's central role in providing a high-quality education" (Kezar & Maxey, 2014, pp. 30, 43). Tinto (1993) purports that students need to experience institutional integration systems, including faculty interactions, for students to persist. Faculty members play a role in retention (Astin, 1975; Hoffman, 2014; Hutto, 2017; Pascarella, 1980). College social systems integration, including faculty and student interactions, is an area of researched barriers to completion (Troester-Trate, 2017). Low faculty-student interaction may result in adverse academic consequences (Guzzardo et al., 2020).

While there is an existing body of research exploring informal faculty-student interaction, I did not find any studies exploring course retention and informal faculty-student interaction for

in-person classes at a four-year or two-year institution. There is sparse research addressing in-person course retention. A more recent researcher is Hutto (2017), and her focus is course retention and faculty status as part-time and full-time. Informal faculty-student contact and the relationship between the interactions and course retention is a less explored area of study (Estes, 2016). Additionally, through a review of the literature, there was significantly more retention research focused on four-year college students than community colleges. Subsequently, there is a likelihood that community college student-faculty relationships are the least researched of the three environments of student-teacher relationship dynamics, which are K-12, traditional college, and two-year institutions (Kim, 2022). Further, Guzzardo et al., (2020) discuss a limitation of their study was not interviewing faculty on their perceptions of informal faculty-student interactions, and my study included interviews with faculty and students. Additionally, Trolian et al. (2016) recommended that future studies investigate the role faculty play in improving students' academic motivation.

Research Question

The primary research question explored informal faculty-student contact and the interactions described by students and faculty in higher retention courses. This study has one research question. The research question aligns with the statement of the problem, the purpose, and are appropriate for the research design.

1. How is informal faculty-student contact in high-retention core courses described by faculty and students at an MSI/HSI community college?

Researcher Perspective and Positionality

As a passionate community college educator with a professional background in politics and community organizing, I deeply care about my student's success and desire to hear their personal stories and experiences. In acknowledging my personal positions (Holmes, 2020), I

strive to create a safe environment for my students to learn and openly communicate by utilizing the theory of change. Commenting on this topic, Dean-Coffey et al. (2012) described, "change, in the broadest and deepest sense, is required to bring about a more just and equitable world" (p. 42). I believe an educator is much more than a vehicle to impart knowledge. However, every semester I experience students dropping the course halfway through or failing to show up until the end. I learned that informal faculty-student contact positively impacts course retention through my research.

During my three and a half years in higher education at the College of Southern Nevada (CSN), I have worked for two different academic departments. I have taught Public Speaking (COM 101) in person, online, and through a hybrid model in the Communication Department. I have also taught Academic Life Skills (ALS) through the English Department in the Summer Bridge Program and the Prison Education Program (PEP) at Florence McClure, a women's correctional facility, and High Desert, a men's prison. Working with incarcerated individuals is highly rewarding. I witness visible changes in their attitude and beliefs about their ability to succeed academically. Through this experience, I hold transformative learning close to my heart.

While teaching during the Summer Bridge Program for Promise Scholarship recipients, the students receive a unique opportunity to develop relationships with each other and faculty. During the informal faculty-student interactions, sharing academic and health-related resources with students resulted in the students feeling comfortable in approaching me for any further questions. Even though the program only ran for two weeks in person, I learned that developing relationships with students outside of the classroom led to a greater level of comfortability for them in the classroom too.

As a researcher, I brought bias to my study based on my background, beliefs, values, and culture (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While I teach students of color predominantly, I am a middle-class White thirty-something woman. Additionally, due to my upbringing and challenging life circumstances, I have a personal bias in feeling greater empathy towards students from broken homes and unfortunate conditions. I am personally invested in the outcome of my research because I want CSN students to be successful. I desire to contribute tangible solutions to improve our lower than the national average retention rates.

My inspiration for this study is my students at CSN. I wanted to understand how informal faculty-student contact impacts course retention. I still wonder what happened to my former students who dropped out mid-way through the semester after sharing disruptive homelife situations with me, including domestic violence, chronic health issues, and homelessness. Therefore, I examined the quality and depth of out-of-classroom interactions and how the contact matters to students' academic success. Hopefully, my findings provide another facet to the complex issue of community college retention.

I applied a social constructivism worldview to my study. I "seek to understand the world where one lives and works" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). I construct my ideas through personal processing to create the subjective meaning of varied and complex experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I gained a deeper understanding of informal faculty-student contact utilizing the social constructivism worldview.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection in qualitative research can include one-on-one interviews and questionnaires (Bergin, 2018). Interviews are useful when there are time constraints (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Surveys are another research method (Bergin, 2018).

Student questionnaire. The questionnaire items came from Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) "Scale II: Interactions with Faculty" and selected questions from "Scale III: Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching" (p. 66). The first five are questions from Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) informal faculty-student scale II and three additional ones are from scale III. I also included a question establishing the participant was at least 18 years of age and demographic questions regarding gender, the number of years attending CSN, and race/ethnicity. The reason for including the demographic questions stems from the literature review and informal faculty-student contact research areas that are missing in understanding the proclivity of some students feeling more comfortable than others when interacting with their instructors inside and outside of the classroom.

Findings

Six themes emerged from the results of the data collection process. Four of them are aligned with the theoretical framework and then two addition ones unfolded during the process. In the analysis of one research question with two participant groups, faculty responses showed common experiences, and students did as well.

Embedded Unit 1: Teachers

Case one is comprised of nine faculty members. Seven of the instructors identified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian, one identified themself as African American, and one described their race/ethnicity as Iranian. Five of the participants are male, and five are female. Additionally, one participant is transgendered. Their ages range from 33 to 70. The participant's years of teaching range from two years to 22. Five faculty members teach full-time, three teach part-time, and one faculty member is a temporary full-time instructor, also known as an e-hire.

Case Summary

In summary, faculty approach students to engage in informal faculty-student interaction. The length of time and the number of times they interact informally varies. The range is from five minutes before class to up to an hour. The topics discussed can create a sense of connection by sharing personal information. Or, the conversation's focus is academic in nature. All faculty members described a meaningful experience, which is also either personal or student-academic success related. The interactions occur in the classroom before and after class, in the hallway, during office hours, meeting on campus for coffee, and even off-campus for breakfast. In these interactions, faculty are keenly aware of the personal and professional boundaries necessary in informal faculty-student contact.

Embedded Unit 2: Students

Case two is comprised of three student interviewees and 67 student survey respondents. Two of the three student interviewees identify their gender as female, and one is non-binary. Additionally, two identified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian, and one identified herself as Hispanic. The students interviewed are from two of the three courses in my study: ENG101 and PSC101. Two attend the North Las Vegas campus, and one attends the Charleston campus.

Student #1 is 18 years old, Student #2 is 28 years old, and Student #3 is 19 years old. The two students taking PSC101 are in their first year of college at CSN, and the student from ENG101 is in their second year of studies.

For the student questionnaire demographic characteristics, 31% identified as male, 50% identified as female, 3% identified as non-binary/third gender, and 2% preferred not to say. The majority of participants selected Hispanic as their race/ethnicity, which is 57%. White/ non-Hispanic comprised 16% of respondents, and 7% selected Black or African American alone, non-Hispanic. Asian-American students make up 4%, 2% identify as some other race alone, non-Hispanic, and 4% are Multiracial. The majority, 64% are in their first year of classes at CSN and a quarter are in their second year. 4.5% are in their third, and less than 2% are in their fourth.

Within-Case Analysis

Faculty and student responses align with the four components of Pascarella's (1980) informal faculty-student interaction model. First is context, followed by exposure and focus, and lastly, impact. Two additional themes emerged too.

Context. The first theme for the faculty and student participants is context, defined as who initiates the interaction (Pascarella, 1980). It also matters if the student interacts with a professor from their major. In community college, not everyone selects a major, and some choose to enter a trade program offered at the college. I found that faculty and students describe informal faculty-student interaction differently. In my study, faculty participants initiated contact more than the students. However, according to my student participants, they believed that they reached out to faculty more than faculty did to them. In reality, both faculty and students initiated interactions.

Exposur*e.* The second theme related to the a priori framework is exposure. Exposure is defined as the frequency of interactions, which is the number of times and length of time the informal interactions occur (Cokley et al., 2004; Pascarella, 1980). For a pair of faculty and student participants from ENG101, there was a commonality in the length of time, and it was described as "brief." The general consensus for interaction time ranges from a few minutes to 30 minutes to a few hours. Instructor #5 had longer office hour interactions than all of the other faculty members, which was about the same amount of time Student #3 interacted with their professor. Instructor #5 had a group of students come to his office weekly and would talk for "over an hour." Student #3 was the only student participant that described an informal interaction with a faculty member that was longer than half an hour, which extended to a "couple of hours".

With respect to the frequency of interactions, by default, there are limitations for part-time faculty without a place to meet with students during office hours. It is uncommon for part-time instructors to have a designated office space. However, Instructor #8 met with students in the Political Science Department breakroom frequently, so the Department offered her a vacant office in another building. The Political Science Department found a creative solution to alleviate the burden of Instructor #8 scrambling to find a secure space to connect with students outside of the classroom. Some of the faculty members reported that meeting with students in their office during office hours is a weekly occurrence. However, none of the student participants mentioned visiting with their professors outside of class weekly. The frequency range presented by student participants was less sparse. For example, Student #1 met with her professors six to eight times a semester.

Focus. The third theme aligned with the theoretical framework analysis is focus. The focus is the reason for the informal interaction between faculty and students (Pascarella, 1980). Pascarella (1980) suggests that the goals of the interaction are either academic or non-academic. From the faculty and student interview responses, there are multiple reasons why students approach faculty and vice versa. Some of the topics discussed are personal or academic related.

Every faculty member explained an example of when a student reached out to them to discuss a personal struggle, including but not limited to a challenge at home, a mental health concern, a trauma situation, or anxiety related. In some cases, the students who chose to open up and be vulnerable about a personal challenge resulted in an opportunity for the faculty member to help the student. For example, Instructor #4 had a "brilliant" student that started to "attend class less frequently." He reached out to her, and "she chose to tell deeply personal details about her unfortunate living situation involving addiction. She wanted to see a counselor." He directed

her to counseling services, and "she finished the semester strong." Students that open up to faculty are possibly life-changing occurrences for them. Conversely, none of the student participants said they engaged in informal contact to share a personal issue or problem with their professors. Student #2 did communicate with her professors to learn more about them and establish a personal connection, though. Similarly, Student #3 spent time with their professors "out of personal interest." Student #3's interactions are for intellectual growth and stimulation. Another non-academic related topic both participant groups shared is small talk or "chit chat."

All three student interviewees contacted the faculty for academic or campus-related reasons. These reasons include receiving feedback or clarification on an assignment or to learn about campus resources. For example, Student #1 said, "I contact them during office hours, outside of office hours, whenever I need anything related to school." Student #3 had an interaction with their professor that led to them understanding CSN on a deeper level. They offered, "I had a professor this semester who took the time to share with me about some of the issues here at CSN that wouldn't necessarily have fallen on the general radar," and they would not know about "the majority of sources here at CSN" had that interaction not occurred. In support of Student #3's claim, most of the faculty participants discussed sharing campus resource information with their students, including the location of the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). PSC 101 Instructor #4's office is located near CAPS, and he often takes consenting students there if it is necessary.

Students decide how "deep" they want to go in sharing personal information with their professors, and some professors share their own personal experiences to establish trust and connection. A clear example is when Instructor #8 said, "me too," when her student confided that they were transgendered. Their common life experience opened the door for her to assist her

student with their personal challenges. There are multiple reasons why students approach faculty and faculty interaction with students. In agreement with Pascarella (1980), the topics are narrowed to two areas: personal and academic.

Impact. The impact is the level of satisfaction derived from an informal faculty-student interaction (Pascarella, 1980). Informal contact between faculty and students can lead to positively or negatively impactful experiences. Every faculty and student participant described a "meaningful" experience. Faculty participants' impactful experiences are academic or personal in nature. Regardless, when faculty have the opportunity to help students, it can make a difference in their lives. For Instructor #5, "there are a lot of them." Talking through issues when students are "hurting with so many things" is meaningful. Similarly, Instructor #6 and Instructor #5 value interacting with students facing hardships and adversity. Conversely, Instructor #9 and Instructor #7's description of a meaningful experience includes a situation where they assisted a student academically beyond the classroom. For example, nominating a student for an award they won and encouraging students to publish their papers. Similarly, all student participants value when faculty are willing to "help" and "support." Student #1 said her "professors have been really helpful" and "really facilitated [her] semester this year. In agreement with Student #1's claim, Student #2 said "it's all been really, really positive and very helpful," and according to Student #3, their professor is "supportive of [intellectual] exploration."

Both embedded units: faculty and students also reported a negative interaction. For faculty, including Instructor #1, Instructor #4, and Instructor #8, their negative interactions involved a student acting unreasonably and potentially violently. This last semester, Instructor #8 had to use the emergency phone for the first time in her teaching career at CSN. Student participants reported belittling, sharing unsolicited political opinions, and faculty expressing

disinterest as reasons for dissatisfaction in their informal faculty-student interactions. Student #2

said,

> Members of the faculty should be reserved about their own personal opinions so as not to influence especially the younger students, and the way that they've used certain situations I think that the information should be provided but not like the blatant personal stances But within the classroom setting I think it is okay if the floors opened up to a discussion, and a student gives an opinion, but I don't think that discussion should necessarily be continued after class. And that is what happened to me.

Faculty and students describe what constitutes a meaningful experience differently.

Other Emerging Themes

    Location. There are multiple places where informal faculty-student interaction occurs.

Faculty participants discussed before and after class in the classroom, texting, via email

communication, in the hallway, and during office hours. However, Instructor #4 and Instructor

#6 mentioned "meeting for coffee" as a location for informal contact. Instructor #4 encourages

students to connect with him through an off-campus bagel and coffee program to talk exclusively

about the field of Psychology and career opportunities. Instructor #6, a part-time faculty member

does not have an office and utilizes coffee on campus to communicate with students when they

approach her with a personal issue. The student participants identified the same locations where

informal contact with faculty happens. Further, Student #3 also mentioned "lunchtime" as a

location.

    Personal/Professional Boundary. The majority of the faculty participants acknowledged

a personal/professional boundary that is adhered to in informal faculty-student interactions.

There are careful considerations regarding what is appropriate. Instructor #3 said,

> I'm not their counselor and I'm not their psychologist and so I'm not going to take on that role. But if something like that happens, I will refer them to people who can help them. Just on the side, I have a second master's degree in School Counseling, which I have never used because I retired soon after because my son got really sick. But that still doesn't make me a counselor, though. I mean, I have rudimentary listening skills, but I

know what my boundaries are. I know where my place is. So I don't attempt to do that. But I would never turn someone away. I would just listen.

Similarly, Instructor #4 shared,

That's a hard one to get into because of prevailing laws and things that you want to watch out for, especially in a power position of the faculty and a student. So what I do is I have my office hours. When we're online, I have virtual office hours. I am available at the podium at the end of every class to meet with students who choose to come up.

Students described a boundary as professors not sharing their political opinions with their students. In one case, a professor continued a conversation in class with Student #2. The professor emailed her after to "criticize her opinion." Student #2 did not appreciate this unsolicited contact. Another boundary is the usage of cellphones and texting as a mode of communication between faculty and students. Both faculty and student participants shared examples of an "uncomfortable" or "awkward" text or phone call received. See table below:

Theme	Faculty	Student
1 context	X	X
2 exposure	X	X
3 focus	X	X
4 impact	X	X
5 location	X	X
6 boundary	X	X

Key Findings

- Finding 1: Faculty report that they approach students more to engage in informal faculty-student interaction, but students report that they approach faculty more.

- Finding 2: Faculty and students engage in informal faculty-student interaction anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours and also engage in informal conversations daily, weekly, or sporadically.

- Finding 3: Faculty described the purpose of informal communication about personal connection more often than the student participants.

- Finding 4: What constitutes a meaningful experience differs for faculty and student participants, although the ethics of care matters to both.

- Finding 5: Faculty-student interaction locations include off-campus, lunchtime, and coffee.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications for this study show the value in the quality of the rich descriptions from my participants of their perceptions of experiences engaging in informal faculty-student interactions. My study adds to the research with the framework used for thematic analysis and the two emerging themes. In my review of the literature, I did not find research utilizing Pascarella's (1980) informal faculty-student contact model as the framework for a qualitative study, including faculty and student interviews. Further, the emerging themes of location, which include off-campus breakfast, coffee, and lunchtime, are an addition to the body of research on informal faculty-student interaction. Further, the finding of noticeable personal/professional boundaries expressed by faculty and students in informal faculty-student interactions is also new information in the field.

The most robust findings in informal faculty-student interaction research occur from longitudinal studies. I recommend future research to track the quantity and quality of interactions over time like Troilan et al. (2016), who collected student interview data on faculty-student interactions three times over four years. Next, I recommend conducting more studies specific to first-generation college students. In future data collection, it is recommended to include a question asking if students are first-generation college students (FGCS). I believe this was a missed opportunity due to my oversight.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, the problem is a gap in research related to informal faculty-student contact in high-retention courses. In my study, in the analysis of my two embedded units: Embedded Unit 1: Teachers and Embedded Unit 2: Students, all of the participants' responses aligned with all four components of Pascarella's (1980) informal faculty-student contact model, which is the framework analysis and themes for this study. All faculty and student responses in the thematic analysis aligned with: context, exposure, focus, and impact. Also, two themes emerged: location and personal/professional boundaries. The six key findings include Finding 1: Faculty report that they approach students more to engage in informal faculty-student interaction, but students report that they approach faculty more. Finding 2: Faculty and students engage in informal faculty-student interaction anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours and also engage in informal conversations daily, weekly, or sporadically. Finding 3: Faculty described the purpose of informal communication about personal connection more often than the student participants. Finding 4: What constitutes a meaningful experience differs for faculty and student participants, although the ethics of care matters to both. Finding 5: Faculty-student interaction locations include off-campus, lunchtime, and coffee. Lastly, Finding 6: Personal/Professional boundaries exist for faculty and students engaged in informal faculty-student interactions. My study adds to the qualitative research on informal faculty-student interactions by exploring faculty and student descriptions related to who initiates the contact, the frequency of interactions, the topics discussed or reasons for the interaction, and the level of satisfaction of the contact.

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