The Value of Being Seen: Faculty-Student Relationships as the Cornerstone of Postsecondary Learning

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of the faculty-student relationship to the endeavor of teaching and learning in higher education. Through personal reflection, it highlights institutional-level approaches to measuring such relationships and provides insight into how faculty might think about their role in relationship-building, student engagement, and student success.

Keywords: *faculty-student relationships; student engagement; learning environment; student success*

Over a decade ago, as a novice 8th grade teacher, I had an experience that has informed my approach to teaching and learning ever since. One of my students, Nathaniel (a pseudonym), was on fire, constantly interrupting class, and doing, it seemed to me at the time, whatever he could to get under my skin. Finally, I took him aside and showed my frustration, which was out of character as I fancied myself the yogic, self-composed teacher. I said something to the extent of "Are you really THIS desperate for my attention?" To which he, very calmly and looking me straight in the eyes, said, "I am the oldest of four brothers. My mom is a single mom. I spend all my time taking care of my little brothers. So, yes. Yes, I am." It hit me like a slap in the face—all of my frustration and annoyance immediately vanished. For the rest of the class I sat right next to him and held all my conferences with students next to his desk. He worked like a champion, occasionally looking up at me with a brilliant smile. He cried on the last day of school when we said goodbye.

That moment changed things for me as a teacher and speaks to many of the issues that are rolled into the complex processes of teaching and learning—students' vulnerability, the need for teachers to exhibit self-control under trying conditions, and the benefits of a caring approach that invites students to bring their lives into the classroom. Although I now teach undergraduate and graduate students at a comprehensive university, these issues remain the same. One of the many challenges for postsecondary educators is to understand both students' social-emotional needs as well as strategies for improving relationships, engaging students, and ultimately fostering an environment conducive to teaching and learning.

In part, this challenge comes from on high. University administrators across the country and around the world are involved in conversations about how to improve persistence rates and retain students, while fostering other aspects of student success. For the past twenty years, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has captured data annually on undergraduate student engagement and helped to direct institutional research on, and conversations about, student success. Research using NSSE data suggests that the most engaged students have higher academic achievement (measured by grade-point average) and 1st to 2nd year persistence rates relative to the least engaged students (Hu & McCormick, 2012), and that students of color and lower ability students benefit the most from increases in engagement (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Serving as both a (former) university administrator and a faculty member, I have heard time and again that faculty must "be available" to students, involve them in research (one of the high-impact practices measured by NSSE), and forge personal connections.

I have attended state and national conferences where institutional researchers and university administrators bemoan their NSSE student-faculty engagement scores as a sign of disengaged faculty who are unable to, or simply unwilling to, build the relationships required for student success. It is worth noting, however, what the NSSE data actually captures and what conclusions we can draw. Prior to 2013, NSSE measured students' perceptions of how often they interacted with faculty outside of the classroom on issues related to coursework and non-coursework on a scale from "very often" to "never." The 2013 survey redesign added a measure of quality, whereby students can rank the quality of interactions with faculty from "poor" to "excellent" (McCormick, Gonyea, & Kinzie, 2013; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). Arguably, these measures of student-faculty interaction can paint a picture of frequency

and quality of engagement, but only with the broadest of strokes and at the highest institutional level. They may tell us that students do not feel "seen" by faculty, but too often result in implorations to "do better," without clear direction as to what that means or how.

A recent review of literature finds that positive student-faculty relationships exist when faculty support students' multifaceted needs, demonstrate caring, acknowledge and are responsive to a range of student diversities, and respect students (Ingraham, Davidson, & Yonge, 2018). Clearly, these themes are not mutually exclusive. Arguably, to be responsive to a diversity of student backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in a respectful way is to demonstrate caring. But what does that look like in practice? Are there specific faculty actions that postsecondary students perceive to be more caring than others?

Research suggests that teaching style is closely related to students' perceptions of faculty caring (Hawk & Lyons, 2008; Miller & Mills, 2019; Neville & Parker, 2017). Faculty who recognize students' learning differences, pay close attention to students' understanding of material, solicit ongoing formative student feedback, and adjust their teaching accordingly are perceived as more caring by undergraduate and graduate students alike (Hawk & Lyons, 2008; Miller & Mills, 2019). Faculty are more likely to be perceived as caring if they enthusiastically engage students through student interaction and personal connections and do not read off PowerPoint presentations (Miller & Mills, 2019). Caring is further associated with instructors' relatability through their in-class use of personal stories, humor, and efforts to understand students' lives outside of the classroom (Miller & Mills, 2019; Neville & Parker, 2017).

There may be cultural differences both in how students perceive care and how faculty express care. Guiffrida (2005) finds that African-American students at a primarily white institution describe caring faculty as those who go "above and beyond" to provide a much more comprehensive investment in individual students through academic, professional, and personal advising, mentoring, and advocating outside of the classroom and who demonstrate a degree of involvement that the author suggests could be considered "intrusive." There is some evidence that students from various racial and cultural backgrounds may perceive African-American faculty to be more likely to exhibit this kind of care (Guiffrida, 2005; Neville & Parker, 2017).

As care ethicists have discussed (Noddings, 2012), the relationship between teacher and student is inherently unequal. A good teacher must invest in each student without expectation of a similar investment in return. A teacher's act of caring for students, in and of itself, is not enough. Students need to perceive an act of caring as such and show "somehow that the caring has been received. He [the student] does not have to express gratitude" (Noddings, 2012, p. 772).

Perhaps this then is the challenge for postsecondary teachers: to express care for our students and learn to read their signals that our efforts to build a connection have been received. Perhaps, to go back to the NSSE data, some students perceive "poor" quality interactions with faculty, not for lack of faculty effort, but because there is a mismatch in what each participant in the relationship perceives as care or investment.

For me, this requires mindfulness, attentiveness, and a willingness to acknowledge when I receive nonverbal signals from students that my attempt to forge a connection through an off-

hand joke in class or a tough love conversation has failed. Although I still feel a sense of shame when I think about my initial response to Nathaniel, I know, in the moments that followed, he started to feel seen. I could tell in the way his face lit up that the message of care was received. From then on, I was able to really teach him, and he was able to really learn. Our postsecondary students deserve the same.

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